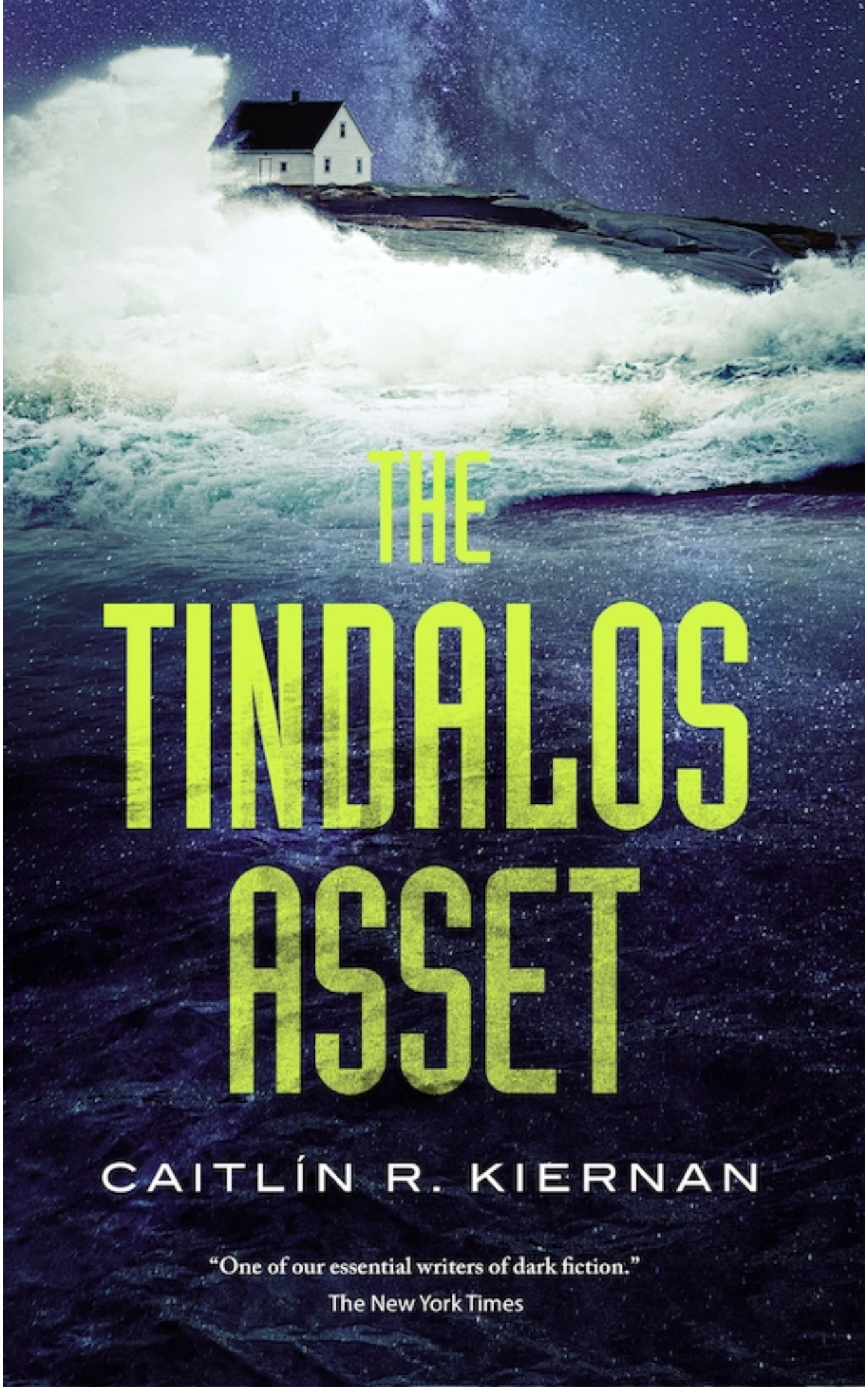
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THE TINDALOS ASSET

CAITLÍN R. KIERNAN

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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For Twisby and the Posby

In Memory of Harlan Ellison (1934–2018)
Visionary. Hero. Mentor. Friend.
&
Julius "Jack" Theodore Cage (1963–2020)
Lost family.

The stars turn, and a time presents itself.

—MARGARET LANTERMAN

. . . out there past men's knowing, where the stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea.

—CORMAC MCCARTHY

1.: Paint Me As a Dead Soul

(Los Angeles, January 17, 2018)

Here's the scene: Ellison Nicodemo, dope sick and all but naked, comes awake to dusty terra-cotta sunlight filtered through tattered chenille curtains and to the staccato notes of a music box and to the smell of someone else's brand of cigarettes. The light and the heat are a wrecking ball in her head, and for some number of seconds she cannot recall where she is or how she got there. She can only in the dimmest, most rudimentary sense recall her own name. But then the pieces fall mercilessly into place, even through the shock of this rude awakening, even through the junkie haze, and even through the murderous Los Angeles morning sunlight seeping in despite the drapes. She squints at the old Sears digital clock radio silently ticking away the minutes from its place on the low table beside her mattress on the floor, and blocky red numerals inform her it's 10:13 a.m.

"It's a goddamn oven in here," says the Signalman, and he mops at his face with a handkerchief. "You know that, right? I couldn't get the heat to shut off. Your thermostat's busted. And your TV. That's busted, too." He closes the lid of the music box, sets it down, and lights a fresh Camel. Through tearing, stinging eyes, Ellison Nicodemo perceives him as a ragged demon in a cheap black suit and shiny cheap shoes, his face slick with sweat, dark sweat stains at his armpits. He's pulled one of the kitchen chairs over to the corner that passes for her bedroom and he looms above her, tall as tall can be, gaunt as a scarecrow.

"How long have you been sitting there?" she asks him, then sniffles and wipes at her nose.

"A while," he replies. "Long enough I'm working up a heat stroke. I tried to open a window and let some fucking air in, but they're all

nailed shut. Did you do that? Did you nail your damn windows shut?"

"What are you doing here?" she asks, instead of answering his questions. She turns her head away from the barbarous sun, coughs and clears her dry, sore throat, breathes in the rancid mélange of scents filling the rented room above a Koreatown combination locksmith and shoe-repair shop—spilled beer, sticky spoiled takeout clinging to Styrofoam boxes, heaps of dirty laundry, candlewax scabs, vomit stains, a transvestite prostitute's cheap perfume, the musky ghost of sex, and her own sour sweat. Down on South Ardmore, the morning traffic rumbles and bleats at itself like an impatient flock of gasoline-powered sheep creeping slowly towards the hollow promise of greener pastures. Then Ellison realizes that she's alone on the mattress.

"You didn't hurt him, did you?" she asks.

"You mean your tranny hooker?" the Signalman asks. "No, I didn't hurt him. I paid him and then I sent him on his merry way. I don't rough up boy whores. Jesus. Just what kind of man do you think I am?"

That's a trick question, if ever there were one, she thinks, and she rubs at her protesting eyes and sits up, her bony shoulders and spine pressed against stucco painted the delicate pale blue of a robin's egg.

"Your television's busted," he tells her again.

"It's not my television," she says. "It came with the place. It was broken when I got here. But if you're making a list, the refrigerator doesn't work, either. Can you at least light me a fucking cigarette?"

"Yeah, sure," says the Signalman. "Here, you take this one." He leans over and sets his Camel's damp filter between her chapped lips, then lights another for himself. Ellison Nicodemo takes a long, soothing drag, praying to the deaf, indifferent god of all atheists that this is just a nightmare and in a moment she'll wake up and it won't even be dawn yet. The pretty Mexican boy will still be sleeping there next to her, breathing softly, only almost snoring, still with her because she promised to pay for the whole night. She'll lie there on the mattress listening to him sleep, listening to the city, and watch

the light from the neon signs turning the windows all the colors of the rainbow.

Surrender Dorothy, indeed.

"Well, does the shower work?" asks the Signalman.

"You still haven't told me what you're doing in my apartment. And if you broke that lock, you're paying for it." She turns her head back towards the offending sun, takes the cigarette from her mouth, and squints up at him again. He looks a lot older than she remembers, older and more weary, more broken down by time and alcoholism and by gravity. There's more grey in his thinning hair, more lines etched deeply into his face. He looks haggard. He looks almost done for. It's only been five years since the last time she set eyes on him, but the Signalman seems to have aged at least a decade and a half in the interim.

"You don't look so good," she says.

"You been anywhere near a mirror lately?" he asks, smoking and sweating and staring straight ahead at the dead TV, like maybe by sheer force of will he can Lazarus the thing back to life. "You know, you said you were going to Europe. When you left the organization, that's what you said, how you were going away to Europe to sort shit out and get your head screwed on straight. Prague, wasn't that what you told me? Didn't you say you were going to Prague?"

Ellison shrugs and takes another drag on the Signalman's cigarette. "Yeah, and I almost made it to the airport," she tells him, "but you know how it goes. The best laid plans and all that happy shit. Should'a, could'a, would'a, but didn't. If wishes were horses, beggars would be rodeo clowns."

"Well, I didn't know," he says, and she gives him the side-eye and laughs.

"Yeah, right. You're telling me Albany hasn't had someone watching me all this time, keeping track, just in case?"

"Just in case what?" he wants to know.

"Just in case anything," she says. "You're telling me there's been no surveillance, no bugs, no tails, no drones, no unmarked black fucking vans lurking about?"

“That’s not what I said,” replies the Signalman. “But I’ve kinda had my hands full ever since you left, and I didn’t know. *That’s* what I said, that *I* didn’t know. You claimed you wanted out, so I figured you didn’t need me looking over your shoulder anymore. Way I figured, she’s a big girl wearing big girl shoes and she can take care of herself. But clearly, I was mistaken on that count.”

Ash falls from the tip of her cigarette onto her bare belly, and she brushes it away, but it leaves behind a charcoal smear on her skin. “It is what it is,” she tells him. “Don’t you dare go turning all white knight on me.” She sits up a little straighter and reaches for one of the amber prescription bottles littering the table by the mattress. There’s a small pharmacopoeia lined up there—opiates, opioids, benzos, a few hits of high-test MDMA from a well-connected dealer over in Little Bangladesh, a few tabs of ketamine from another dealer in Silver Lake, half a vial of fairly decent cocaine, and so forth and so on. She pops a childproof cap and shakes two white Vicodin out into her palm, just something to take the edge off until she’s awake enough to fix. Until the Signalman finally spits out whatever’s on his chest, gets it out of his system and goes away and she can proceed with the perfected monotony of her day. Her mouth is almost too dry to swallow the pills, but she manages. Just.

“I need to take a leak,” she says and sets her cigarette down on the rim of an overflowing Disneyland souvenir ashtray balanced precariously on the edge of the small table, next to the clock radio.

“Well, I’m not stopping you,” says the Signalman, but he stands up and scoots the chair aside, like that’s exactly what he was doing. Then he offers her a hand, and she takes it. The Signalman pulls Ellison Nicodemo up off the dirty mattress, and she has to steady herself against the wall for a moment, waiting for the spins to pass, before she can stand on her own, much less make the long trek all the way to the bathroom.

“When’s the last time you got around to eating anything?” the Signalman asks, glancing about at the discarded, grease-stained wrappers from taco trucks and Korean barbeque joints. “And I mean something that actually counts as food, mind you, something that wasn’t measured out in milligrams and pressed into a pill?”

She ignores the question, because he doesn't want to hear the answer.

"That's what I thought," the Signalman mutters, only half to himself.

She makes it the rest of the way to the toilet all on her own, so there's that to be proud of, and then she closes the door behind her, turns the latch, pulls down her underwear and sits, and she pisses for what seems like a very long time. Like piss gremlins came while she was sleeping and filled her bladder with the contents of MacArthur Park Lake, like she hasn't pissed in weeks. Her nose drips and she wipes it on the back of her hand, then wipes her crotch with the last few squares of toilet paper from the last roll in the apartment. Sweat falls from her forehead to spatter the pink-and-white mosaic of hexagonal ceramic tiles at her feet. She gets up, flushes, and tries to make it out past the cracked mirror above the sink without catching a glimpse of her own wasted reflection, but she fails.

"You fall in?" the Signalman calls impatiently from the other side of the bathroom door. "You might be interested to know I ain't got all morning."

"How about you just give me a goddamn minute," she mutters, not quite loudly enough that he can hear, and she stands there staring back at herself, at the strung out, diminished ghost of the woman she was that last long-ago time she and the Signalman talked. She turns thirty-one in April, but could easily pass for the roughest sort of forty-five. Her skin looks more like wax than flesh. She's lost so much weight it's not hard to count her ribs or see the outline of her sternum between her small breasts, and there are sunken hollows beneath her cheekbones. Her eyes look bruised, as if someone's been beating her on a regular basis, and her teeth feel loose in her mouth. Her shoulder-length, dishwater-blonde hair is a snarled mess that would make a fine home for a family of homeless mice. There are track marks on both forearms and between her toes and fingers.

And then there are the *other* scars, the ones that have not followed from bad habits, neglect, and self-inflected wounds. Ragged lines of proud flesh, still vivid pink even after more than half a

decade, emerging from beneath her hairline and running down either side of her neck, continuing along her shoulders and arms, her ribcage, her waist and hips and thighs, the outsides of her legs, all the way south to her ankles. They look sort of like someone tried to carve a tiny railroad into her skin. There's another set on her hands, beginning at the tips of her little fingers and ending at her wrists. Seven years ago, the agency offered her the best cosmetic surgeons that money could buy. Seven years ago, she said no and walked away. Now she'd make a fine addition to any passing sideshow, a freak to point at and pity and be grateful that's not *you* up there. But the scars are hers, and she owns them, same as she owns the pain and her addiction. Masking them with surgery would only add another lie to the fold.

Ellison Nicodemo turns on the tap and splashes her face with a few handfuls of lukewarm water that stink of rust and chlorine. She imagines the Signalman scowling and telling her, *"You look just about near enough to dead, it's a holy wonder they haven't already come and carried you away to the boneyard."*

Maybe I am, and they have, and this is Hell.

She screws the top off an almost empty plastic bottle of Listerine Cool Mint and swishes and spits into the stained porcelain bowl, then gets her hands wet again and runs her fingers through her hair in a half-hearted attempt to persuade it to behave.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she whispers to that other her in the mirror. "What do you care what he thinks?" When her reflection doesn't see fit to answer either question, she spits again, and this time there's a little blood in her saliva. She washes it down the drain, unlocks the door, and goes back out to face the Signalman. He's returned to his chair and is staring at the dead TV again.

"This thing with you and the television," she says, "what's that all about? Have I missed the end of the world again or what?" She goes to the kitchenette and opens the lid of the blue-and-white forty-eight-quart Coleman chest sitting on the floor by the useless refrigerator. Most of yesterday's ice has melted, but the beer inside is still cold enough. She takes out a can of National Bohemian and holds it against her forehead and cheeks for a moment.

“You want a beer?” she asks.

“Maybe I didn’t make myself clear, how you need to shake a leg.”

“You made yourself clear,” says Ellison.

“You know, I can remember when you stayed sober as a judge until noon.”

“Do you want a beer or not?”

And then the Signalman relents, says what the hell, and she takes out a second can and closes the lid of the cooler and goes back to her nest of sheets on the mattress. He takes his can and cracks it open, and she opens hers, and for a few moments they sit quietly drinking the cold Natty Boh, not talking. She finds the Public Enemy T-shirt she wore the night before and pulls it on, hiding her pale breasts and her ribsy abdomen and the strange train-track scars. The shirt is ragged black cotton, much loved, worn so many years now that it’s worn thin and worn entirely through in some spots. Printed on the front is the silhouette of what might or might not be a cop in the crosshairs of a gun.

Finally, it’s Ellison Nicodemo who breaks the silence.

“For a minute there,” she says, “I thought maybe you were going to meetings again,” and the Signalman shakes his head.

“Well, I ain’t, so you can stop worrying your pretty head over that. And I’m not going to lecture you, either, so you can stop fretting about that, as well.”

“What are you doing here?” she asks for the third time.

“Right up front,” he says, “I want you to know that it wasn’t my decision. Truth is, I advised against it. When they brought me your file, when I found out about”—and he motions at her and at the squalor with his beer can—“I told them you were clearly in no shape for active duty. Hell, I told them I doubted you were up to walking and chewing gum at the same time.”

She looks up at him, then looks down at her feet. There’s a dirty Band-Aid wrapped around her left big toe, but she can’t remember how long it’s been there or what it’s covering up. “I quit,” she says. “I was permanently discharged. I have the paperwork in a drawer over there.”

“And we both know that no one’s ever really, truly quit. You know permanent means, on a good day, provisional. And you also know that what Albany wants, Albany gets, and they get it one way or another, by hook or by crook or courtesy a few enhanced interrogation techniques.”

She takes another swallow of beer, and now she’s staring at the dead TV screen, too.

“I’m not good for shit,” she says. “I haven’t been clean in over two years.”

“Yeah. I know. So does the company. They just don’t care. It just doesn’t fucking matter.”

She finishes her Natty Boh, crumples the can, and tosses it at a low heap of empties that has accumulated on the other side of the room, a lopsided aluminum talus slope.

The Signalman frowns and sighs and watches her like a disappointed parent or a heartbroken lover, and the truth is, he’s been a little of both to her. He says, “We don’t have time to dry you out. So you’ll have what you need. I’ve seen to that. You’ll have better than whatever garbage you’ve been shooting. And when it’s done, if you want rehab, you’ll get the best. And if you don’t want rehab, there’ll be no pressure, no guilt-tripping. I’ll bring you right back here and let you get on with—whatever you call this.”

She starts to reach for the cigarette she left in the ashtray, but it’s burned down to the filter. So she finds her pack of Chesterfield Reds and lights one.

“And if I say fuck off and refuse this generous offer?” she asks.

“Then they’ll hurt you, and when they’re done hurting you, they’ll still get what they want, which is something else you already know. You do not need me going into the particulars. You know the particulars. On more than one occasion, you yourself have participated in the particulars.”

“Yeah,” she says around a mouthful of smoke. She reaches down and pulls off the Band-Aid. The toenail’s missing.

“Jesus Harold Christ,” the Signalman grumbles, looking disgusted, leaning over and examining her foot. “It’s a wonder you don’t have fucking gangrene by now.”

"Shit. I don't even remember doing that."

"Well, maybe I don't have time to get you clean. But I do have time to have you checked out. Get some fluids and antibiotics in you. A goddamn tetanus shot, for fuck's sake."

"I'm fine," she says.

"I wasn't asking," he tells her. "And you've been chasing the dragon—and just about every other goddamn thing—so long now that I seriously I doubt you know *fine* from a tomcat's asshole."

There's another silence then, and Ellison Nicodemo sits smoking her Chesterfield and gazing at the scabby, pulpy mess where her toenail used to be. The Signalman takes out his iPhone and sends a text. She doesn't bother asking him what it was. He waits for the reply, then puts his phone away.

"You haven't even told me what this is all about," she says.

"Don't worry. You'll be briefed when we get where we're going."

"The least you could do right now—and I mean the very *fucking* least—is give me some sort of idea why I'm being dragged back into the fucking fray in the shape I'm in and after what happened in Atlanta. You can't sit there and say you don't at least owe me that courtesy."

The words come out hard and angry and bitter, even though that hadn't actually been her intent. She was with the company plenty long enough to understand that he's just doing his job, same as she just did her job. Ain't nothing personal, chica. He didn't have to come in here and finesse the stinking junkie. He could have had her picked up and hosed off and never had to get his hands dirty. But now that's just so much more spilled milk under the bridge, so to speak. Fuck him and fuck Albany. She just wants to fix and go back to sleep and go back to pretending that she's never lived any other life but the slow, sloppy death she's living now.

"All right," he says. "Fair enough." And the Signalman sets his beer can down on the floor, and he turns his head away, looking at the sunlight leaking in through those ugly chenille drapes, instead of looking at her. He rubs at his forehead like someone getting a headache. "You know, maybe if you had a TV that worked, or maybe the fucking internet, you wouldn't be quite so surprised, me showing

up like this. Between that cheddar-faced baboon playing president and the mess with the lunatic man-child in Pyongyang . . .” He trails off and lights another cigarette.

“But this isn’t about North Korea and it also ain’t about Trump,” she says. “Whatever *this* is.”

“No, it ain’t. But wouldn’t you think the world’s already got enough shit on its plate these days without the sorta shit this *is* about? I swear, I’d give my left nut to have Reagan back right now.”

“Fuck,” says Ellison, “I’d give your left nut to have *Nixon* back right now.”

“Look at you,” he laughs and glances at Ellison just long enough to spare her a half-hearted wink. “The Republican princess with the golden arm and the missing toenail. And they say the GOP has forsaken all integrity.”

“Okay, so why *are* you here?”

The Signalman takes a long pull on his Camel and, before he exhales, says, “Because she’s come back.” And then he puffs out a cloud of smoke to make any pint-sized dragon proud.

“Because *who’s* come back?” Ellison asks him, but suddenly the tiny hairs on her arms and the back of her neck are prickling and rising to attention, good little soldiers, good as any horror novel cliché. She already knows the answer. In a bright, sick flash she realizes that she’s known it all along. Why else would Albany want her, after all this time and even in the shape she’s in? Why else would she ever matter again to anyone?

“*She’s* come back,” the Signalman tells Ellison again, a little more emphatically than before. “I’m here on this beautiful morning, fucking up your shit and dragging you outta dope-fiend heaven, because Jehosheba Talog’s come back.”

Ellison takes a deep breath, and she holds it a moment, like a swimmer hyperventilating, getting ready for a dive into cold water. “You’re sure?” she asks. “You’re absolutely sure it’s her?”

“Kiddo, I wouldn’t be here if we weren’t.”

“And what? They think maybe me wiping out that first time around, it was just a fluke, and, all evidence to the contrary, I’m still

their ace in the hole? I'll just blow my magic dog whistle and *this* time it'll do the trick?"

"Probably something like that, I suppose. What happened in Atlanta, wipeout or not, it seems to have bought us a few years. I guess they think you might be able to buy us a few more, and that's plenty good enough for government work. You know, it's been an awful long time now since we've actually *won* a war. Why, buying time, that's the new V-Day."

Ellison coughs, then wipes her mouth and looks at the floor, at her dirty feet, at the missing toenail. "So a long shot at an extension on an overdue loan," she says.

"Like the man said," the Signalman tells her, "it is what it is."

"Yeah, all right," says Ellison Nicodemo, then stubs out her cigarette out on the edge of the Disneyland ashtray. "But I'm gonna need a few minutes." And she thinks how amazing it is that her voice is hardly trembling at all.

The Signalman wipes at his sweaty face with the white handkerchief, then takes out the silver pocket watch he always carries, the watch that earned him his nickname many long years ago. He checks the time, then puts the watch away again.

"I can give you fifteen, but that's it. And you might want to find a different shirt. LAPD is our escort to the airfield."

"Yeah," she says and gets up and goes back to the bathroom. She shuts the door again, locks it again, and then she opens the toilet lid and pukes until there's nothing in her left to puke, until she's only dry-heaving. The Signalman leaves her alone to be sick in peace and clean up after, because that's the only shred of dignity he has to offer her, the only stingy scraps of generosity. Today, that's pretty much loaves and fishes.

2.: Ballad of a Thinner Man

(West Hollywood, June 1969)

It would be a gross understatement to say that Maxie Honeycutt is a nervous man. Cat gets out of bed every morning, he checks his shoes for bugs, and not the creepy-crawly sort, but the sort he imagines the DOD and CIA and the goddamn FBI leave there while he sleeps. Cat sits down to breakfast, he's digging in his box of Wheaties to be sure no one's planted a microphone at the bottom. One day or another, he'll be walking down Sunset Boulevard or Ventura and a car's gonna backfire, and Mr. Maxie Honeycutt's gonna shit himself, then drop dead from a coronary. This will happen, sure as pigs make little baby pigs, this or some other equally histrionic ending for the skinny little man his friends—such as they are—call Paranoid Jack. No one quite remembers why people started in calling him Jack, though the paranoid part is obvious to anybody who's spent fifteen straight minutes in this cat's company. So you'd think he'd do his best to steer clear of weird shit and questionable business ventures with nefarious individuals. You would, however, be wrong. For example, tonight Maxie's in a booth at the Whiskey a Go Go, trying to be heard over shitty acid rock and a hundred stoned motherfuckers talking all at once. Across from him, Charlie Six Pack is rolling a joint, some primo shit just come in from Panama. Charlie Six Pack is a good example of the company Maxie Honeycutt keeps. Cat spent seven years up at Folsom for robbery and a concealed weapons charge. Says he didn't do it, but what the fuck else would he say?

Maxie leans across the table, not quite shouting, but it's not like he can hear himself think over the noise. And he says, "I don't give two shits and a crap what the damn thing's worth, man, cause I ain't gonna hold it, not for love nor money."

“Don’t be like that,” says Charlie Six Pack. “I thought you were my go-to guy, right? I thought we was tight, and you were the guy I could go to when I can’t go to anyone else, right?”

“Well, no,” replies Maxie. “No, not this time. This time, you’ll just have to find someone else. I ain’t holding that thing. I don’t even like to look at it.”

Now, what he’s talking about is the little jade figurine that Charlie Six Pack came back from Nevada with last week. There’s a brown paper bag on the table between them, and inside the bag is the figurine. The bag’s rolled closed and there are what appear to be grease stains on it, like maybe it held fried chicken or churros before it held the jade figurine. Charlie, he calls it an idol, claims it was carved by the Apaches or the Incans or some shit like that. For all Maxie knows, it was made last month in Tijuana or by some Buddha Head down on Magdalena Street. Whoever made the thing, that cat must have been having just about the nastiest magic carpet ride since Albert Hofmann accidentally dosed himself back in 1943. It’s almost big as Maxie’s fist, the thing in the bag, and when Charlie pulled it out and showed it to him, Maxie got this queasy, tight feeling in his gut and goose bumps up and down his arms.

“Yo, man, don’t be like that,” says Charlie Six Pack, and he scowls fit for a Greek tragedy and lights the doobie. “Forty-eight hours, right? Hell, probably not even that long. Just until the Turk comes back from that thing in Catalina and I don’t gotta worry about my place getting tossed before I can make the handoff, okay? Pigs toss the place and find this, then nobody gets a payday.”

“What the hell the pigs gonna want with it?” Maxie asks, eyeing the greasy paper bag even more warily than before. “You steal it?”

“If I’d have stolen it, I’d have told you up front.”

“Then what do the pigs want with it?”

Charlie Six Pack sucks in a lungful of Panama red, and he squints at Maxie through the haze. “Pigs don’t want shit with it,” says Charlie, and he blows smoke from his nostrils like a Chinese dragon. “I’m just saying, is all. Why take chances?”

“Well, I don’t like it,” Maxie Honeycutt tells him.

“I ain’t asking you to like it, man.”

"What's the Turk even want with something like that?"

"Jesus, Jack, what the Turk does and does not want ain't none of my business, and it sure as hell ain't none of *your* business. One night, maybe two at the outside, you get five percent of my cut, just for babysitting a paper bag. And don't tell me you can't use the bread. I know you, and I know better."

"Ain't the bag that bothers me," says Maxie, Mr. Paranoid Jack himself, he who swears it was aliens working with the Mafia, the Bilderberg Group, and the RAND Corporation had John F. and Bobby Kennedy killed. Same cat will talk for hours about how fluoridated water, filtered cigarettes, and artificial sweeteners are an Illuminati plot aimed at pacifying the masses. Point being, the cat is given to flights of fancy.

"Man, you're one for the books," says Charlie Six Pack. "Why don't you just simmer down and stop freaking out on me." He takes another toke, shakes his head, then offers the joint to Maxie. Now, normally Maxie's fine getting high with the likes of Charlie Six Pack, but right at this particular moment, well, he's thinking he's better off trying to keep a clear head. So he says no thank you, and he asks again where the thing in the bag came from. Not that he actually wants to know, mind you, or thinks he'll get any sort of an honest answer, but Maxie figures he keeps this up long enough, Charlie's bound to grow discouraged and go looking for someone else to hassle.

"I told you," says Charlie, "Indians made it. You ever heard of the Donner Party, those folks got lost in the mountains and had to eat each other to keep from freezing to death?"

"Yeah, man," Maxie replies, "I've heard of the freaking Donner Party. Who the fuck hasn't heard of the freaking Donner Party?" And he sits back in the booth and takes an unfiltered Pall Mall from the half-empty pack in his shirt pocket.

"Okay, well, so the dude from whom I acquired this little objet d'art," and Charlie nods at the paper bag, "this dude's a professor out in Salt Lake City, this Mormon dude—Brigham Young University—and he claims the doodad there belonged to one of the survivors of

the Donner Party, one of those didn't get eaten, but did the cannibalizing. Professor, he tells me that this guy—"

"What was his name?"

"What's who's name? The Mormon dude?"

"No, man. The Donner Party cat."

"Fuck if I know," says Charlie Six Pack, and he takes another hit. "Who cares what the guy's name was, man? Do you want to hear this or not?"

Maxie Honeycutt, he taps his Pall Mall on the back of his left hand, then lights it. He shrugs and stares at this chick at the bar, because he thinks she looks a lot like Grace Slick and he's got a serious hard-on for Grace Slick, even if he can't stand fucking hippie music.

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't," he says.

Right then, Charlie Six Pack snaps his fingers real loud and Maxie jumps. "Now I remember," says Charlie Six Pack. "Dude's name was Breen. Patrick Breen."

"Who's name was Patrick Breen? The professor?"

"No, man, the cannibal. Way that guy at Brigham Young told it, Breen said he found the thing"—and Charlie nods at the greasy paper bag again—"up there in the mountains, and it was the doodad here told Breen that if they ate the dead people, if they could get over being all squeamish and shit, maybe they wouldn't all starve and freeze to death hundreds of miles from civilization and no hope of rescue till spring. Some kind of Indian fetish or heathen idol or some shit, I don't know, right, and desperate people, well, you figure they were all just looking for some excuse not to let that meat go to waste. So, great, fine, blame it on voices from this doodad. Rationalization, man." And Charlie Six Pack taps at his forehead.

"So, how'd this professor get his hands on it?"

"No idea, man. He didn't say, and I didn't ask."

"And what's the Turk want with something like that?" Maxie asks again.

"Look, ain't the Turk who wants it. It's this cat down in Australia, right? So, you gonna hold onto it for me or what? You do it, I'll cut you in for *seven* percent."

“I don’t want to go getting messed up in some sort of heavy Apache hoodoo horseshit,” Maxie Honeycutt tells him, and he takes a long pull on his Pall Mall, then checks his watch like maybe he’s got somewhere better to be when he most certainly does not. “I don’t like the look of the thing.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” sighs a thoroughly exasperated Charlie Six Pack. He licks a thumb and forefinger and pinches out the joint, then stashes it in a snuff tin. “I always knew you were crazy, man, crazy fucking Paranoid Jack, loonier than a run-over dog, but I didn’t ever take you for the superstitious sort. Didn’t finger you for the sorta guy’s gonna let a spook story get in between him and easy money, leaving me fucking hanging in the wind like this.”

“It ain’t nothing personal, Charlie.”

“Sure it ain’t,” Charlie tells Maxie, and the cat makes no effort whatsoever to hide his displeasure. “But don’t think word ain’t gonna get back to the Turk how you had a chance to lend a hand and didn’t do diddly squat, all right?”

“Sounds fair,” says Maxie Honeycutt, though he doesn’t think it sounds fair at all, the off chance he might find himself in Dutch with the Turk just because he doesn’t want to play nursemaid to Charlie Six Pack’s little green gargoyle.

“What time you got?” Charlie wants to know. “I have to make some calls, man, try to find someone ain’t such a goddamn pussy.”

“My watch says it’s seven fifteen,” Maxie tells him, “but it’s running a little slow, because of all NASA’s excess electromagnetism or something.”

“You and your fucking watch,” snorts Charlie Six Pack, and he takes his greasy brown paper bag and leaves Maxie Honeycutt alone in the booth. And Maxie, he tries hard to feel relieved. He sits there chain smoking Pall Malls and staring at that girl who doesn’t look even half as much like Grace Slick as he at first glance thought she did. He’ll have a few beers, stick around for the band, then head back to Silver Lake and the two-room rattrap he calls home. And round about dawn, cat’s gonna wake up from the worst bad dream he’s had since he was a kid. He’s gonna wake up and find he’s pissed the sheets. He’ll turn on the radio real damn loud and sit by the

kitchenette window, smoking and drinking from a warm bottle of Wild Irish Rose while he watches the sun come up. He'll sit there trying hard not to think about Charlie Six Pack's ugly fucking doodad or blizzards or a raw January wind howling like a banshee through high mountain passes.

3.: Saint Joan(ah) Redux

(Atlanta, regarding January 12, 2011)

The way I heard it, Ms. Esmé Symes was born Esther Simon, the youngest daughter of an evangelical minister who spoke in tongues, handled rattlesnakes, and drank strychnine from Ball mason jars. There are two or three different stories floating around about why she up and left that pissant backwater Florida town, but they all come back around to her daddy not keeping his hands to himself. Might be she killed him. Might be her momma killed him. Might be the man only lost his ministry to the scandal and slunk off into the Everglades to drink away whatever was left of his miserable, sorry life. Whichever, Esther became Esmé and spent some time with a traveling show, reading palms and tarot cards, telling rubes what they'd want to hear about their futures, instead of telling them what she really saw. Oh, I'm not saying I believe she was a bona fide psychic or clairvoyant or whatever. But that lady, she most definitely made a living convincing people she *was,* and, to tell the God's honest truth, if I'm gonna deny there's anything to all this sixth-sense folderol, well, then I'm left with the mystery of how exactly it was she led two detectives from APD Homicide to that empty warehouse between Spring Street and West Peachtree.

Of course, it wasn't the first time she'd helped the police. There was that kid who'd gone missing out in Stone Mountain, two years earlier, and there was the Decatur woman who'd been raped, murdered, dismembered, and buried in her own backyard. Remember her? Well, Esmé found both of them, so when she made the call about the warehouse, we sat up and listened. Now, if she'd been upfront and warned us what she thought we were going to find in there, I like to think someone would have had the good sense to hang up on her. Tell her to go fuck herself. But apparently full

disclosure was not that woman's style. And looking back, the whole day seems sorta like walking into an ambush, climbing the three flights of stairs up to that long fucking hall, and then, she'd told us, go all the way down to the end. That's where we'd find what we were looking for. Down at the end of the hall.

Franklin Babineaux, that skinny kid from New Orleans, he's first into the room, and then me, and then Audrey. Yeah, she was still my partner, right. This was still six months or so before her accident. Anyway, so, by the time I make it through the door, Babineaux, he's already gotten a big, juicy eyeful, and he's just sorta standing off to the side, fucking dumbstruck, gawking. And there before us was the nightmare that Esmé Symes had neglected to elaborate on. My first thought—I shit you not—my very first thought was how it all had to be some sort of sick-ass practical joke. Something like that, your brain doesn't want to admit you're really seeing what you *think* you're seeing, and if you *are* seeing it, well, then it can't possibly be what it *looks* like. Oh, you've seen the photos, I know, but the photos, let me assure you, they don't convey one one-hundredth of the sheer surreal fucked-upness. The photos, they're like a fading memory of the real thing, like, let's say, a copy of a copy. For one, you look at them and you don't get the smell. Like a fish market or a salt marsh at low tide, and just beneath the oily, fishy ocean smell there was the sharp metallic stink of all that blood. See, you take away the smell and you take away that punch to the gut. Thank sweet damn Jesus it was winter. I don't even want to imagine what it would have been like walking into that shitstorm in July instead of January.

But, like I said, first thing through my head was that someone had set it all up just to fuck with us. Because right there in front of me, hanging from the ceiling, was this goddamn fourteen-foot great white shark. The tip of its nose was just barely touching the concrete floor. I knew what kind of shark it was, because when I was a kid, my dad and me, we used to deep-sea fish down in Destin, and once one of his buddies landed a great white. Only, the one in the warehouse was bigger, a lot bigger. Probably, right then, it looked like just about the biggest goddamn fish ever was. Later, I heard it weighed in at something like fifteen hundred pounds. Anyway, the shark had been

suspended from a hook, from a block and tackle rig that had been set into the ceiling of that place, a rope looped about the shark's tail. Its jaws were bulging out of its mouth, just because of gravity, I guess, because of its own weight. There were rows and rows of glistening triangular teeth big as my damn thumb, serrated like a steak knife. And its eyes were bugging out, too, those horrible black fucking eyes. Even when a shark's alive, its eyes look dead.

Of course, you know that's not the worst of it. Not even close. That fish was just the opening act, right?

So, there we are, and the initial shock's beginning to fade. Audrey, I remember she started in laughing. At the time, it pissed me off, but now I get it. I mean, it really is like the setup for a bad joke, right? Three cops walk into an empty warehouse in downtown Atlanta. There's a fucking dead shark hanging from the ceiling. One cop says to the other cop, "Who brought the hush puppies?" and etcetera. Real funny. Anyway, I remember Babineaux looking over at me like, "Hey man, you know what this is, right? You've seen this shit before, right?" Me, I'm just trying to let it all sink in, okay. Because it's not just the shark. There's this enormous design drawn on the concrete floor, sorta painted on the floor in red sand. You know, like those Tibetan monks do. Later, one of the specialists that the department called in—an anthropologist from Georgia Tech—he said the design was a mandala, like in Hindu religion. To me, what it put me in mind of was a maze. And right at the center of all those parallel lines, all those circles inside circles, was the shark.

"Call it in," I say to Babineaux, and Audrey, she says to me, "What the fuck is he supposed to call it in as?"

I was the one who found the body. But you know that, too. Those lines of sand on the floor, they were spaced just far enough apart from each other that you could get to the shark without stepping on them. Straight off, I felt this instinctual sorta revulsion at the thought of doing that, putting a foot down on one of those lines. Step on a crack, break your momma's back, right? So, while Babineaux is making the call, I go and ignore that little nagging voice in the back of my head that's telling me just to get the fuck out and let someone else deal with this crazy shit. Audrey, she tells me we should wait for

the ME, and when she says that, I swear she sounds scared. And that also pisses me off. “Christ,” I tell her, “it’s just a goddamn *fish*. What the fuck.” All the same, crossing that space between the doorway and the shark—and it couldn’t have been more than ten feet—I am perfectly cognizant how I’m being so careful not to step on even one of those lines, acting like some superstitious seven-year-old, and, hey, that’s something *else* pissing me off. That’s the thing pissing me off the *worst*.

I get up close and I see how the shark’s belly is split open, right down the middle. Well, not just its belly. The fish has been sliced open from the underside of its head most of the way back to the tail. And here and there, it’s been sewn shut again with nylon fishing line. We couldn’t see that when we first came in, because of the angle it was hanging at. Anyway, this doesn’t come as a surprise. No reason it should. You catch a fish, you gut it. And who the hell ever had gone to the trouble to drag a fifteen-foot great white shark up three flights of stairs, surely they’d have done themselves the favor of not hauling along the extra weight of its innards. That’s just plain common sense.

“They’re on their way,” says Babineaux.

I reach into a pocket and pull out a pair of latex gloves, and that’s when I see three fingers poking through between a gap in those nylon stitches. A thumb, an index finger, the middle fucking finger—a *woman’s* fingers with this deep red nail polish, some shade of red so dark it is almost black. And the fingers, they’re fucking moving, okay. I yell, “We need an ambulance, we need a fucking ambulance right fucking now,” or some shit like that, and I’m digging around in my coat, trying to find my pocket knife. Next thing I know, Audrey’s standing there beside me, and Jesus God, the look on her face. I could talk all day and I wouldn’t ever come up with words to convey that expression. She starts in tugging at the fishing line with her hands, but it’s slippery with blood and oil and shit, and the line’s like, you know, hundred-pound monofilament test. Finally, I get my knife out and start cutting, and—whenever I come to this part of the story, it’s always like, looking back, like right here a flashbulb goes off in my head or something. Suddenly, everything is so clear, so stark, more real than real—and I know that doesn’t make sense. I get that,

see, but I don't know what would. If you've ever been in a car crash, it's kinda like that. That exact instant when two cars collide, a moment that seems so perfectly defined, but that also seems sorta smeared.

Anyway . . .

It doesn't take me all that long to get the fish's belly open again. I nick myself once or twice in the process, but I don't even realize that until later, when the EMTs arrive. I have a scar on my left palm from that day. Souvenirs, right?

Yeah, she was still alive, the woman they'd stitched up inside the dead fish. Only barely, but, well, you've read the files. You probably read the book that cocksucker from New York City wrote about the whole thing. So you know how it was. We're standing there, and Audrey, she's saying, "Oh God, oh dear God, oh God," over and over, and back behind us, Babineaux is praying the fucking rosary or some other sorta Catholic mumbo jumbo. The woman in the shark, she's completely naked and she looks maybe twenty-five, probably younger, but it's hard to tell much because she's covered head to toe in rotting shark. "We have to get her out of there," says Audrey, and I'm holding the sides of the fish's belly open, and Audrey, she's leaning in and putting her arms around the woman. Thank fuck she wasn't conscious. I think that's the one small piece of mercy we got that day, that she wasn't conscious. Audrey's in up to her shoulders, and I'm starting to gag from the stink. I just know I have maybe ten seconds before I spew coffee and Krispy Kreme donuts, and that's when Audrey says, "Oh Jesus, Mike, they've been sewn together."

"What?" I ask. "What's been sewn together?"

"She's *sewn* in here," Audrey replies, "sewn *to* the fucking fish," and there's this terrible, brittle tone in her voice, like eggshells. I'm never gonna forget the way she sounded. And that's when I see what the woman inside the shark is holding. The sons of bitches who'd done it to her, they arranged her hands—sewed *them* together, too—so that she's cradling the thing in her palms. She seems to be holding it out to us, like an offering. Only, I know it *isn't* three cops that offering is meant for. I don't know what the fuck I was thinking—hell, I'm *not* thinking. I'm running on shock and instinct, shit like

that. I take it from her hands, that jade idol, what the fuck ever it is, and I just stand there, holding it, staring at it. You spend fifteen years on the force, and you think maybe you've seen evil, maybe you've stared it in the face enough times that you and evil are chummy old acquaintances. But I know right then how wrong I was to ever believe I've seen evil. That chunk of rock, not much bigger than a plum, *it's* evil, true and absolute, indescribable, and I want to put it down. More than anything, I just want to set it down on the floor with the lines of red sand. But I can't. Sounds hokey as hell, but it's like that Nietzsche quote, the one about staring into the abyss and it staring back into you. I'm still standing there holding that thing when backup arrives. They have to pry it out of my hands.

As for Esmé Symes, one week later she hangs herself with an extension cord. She was brought in twice for questioning, so I think she knew she was the closest thing we had to a suspect, that she was in the department's sights. The DA's screaming for blood. And her apartment, it's fucking wallpapered with sketches of that goddamned jade atrocity, right? Dozens and dozens of sketches, from all different angles. But she doesn't leave a note, not unless you're gonna call all those drawings a suicide note. You ask me—and I know you didn't—but you ask me whether she was involved or not, and all I got to say is Miss Esmé Symes got off easy. She got off scot-fucking-free.

4.: Creature → Feature ← Comforts

(Arbor Hill, Albany, New York, June 7, 2028)

There's a game that they play, Ellison Nicodemo and the psychiatrist. She tells him a lie, and he patiently makes like he doesn't *know* that she's lying, no matter how outrageously, how egregiously the lie contradicts some previous lie that she's already passed off as the truth. They have arrived at the simple rules of the game by a silent, unspoken gentleman's agreement. It's true no one will ever win, at least not fair and square, but—she tells herself, whenever she feels up to pretending there's a bright side—the most she'll ever lose is one hour every two weeks, and, after all, she's got time to burn. If time were money, Ellison Nicodemo would be Scrooge McDuck. She can afford the pantomime.

Exempli gratia:

It's five past two on a Monday afternoon and Ellison sits on the wide, slightly threadbare corduroy sofa in the psychiatrist's office, wishing, just like always, that she could get by without the charity of the agency's stingy pension. If she could only manage *that* trick somehow, then she'd be free to tell the psychiatrist enough was enough and his services were no longer required, thank you very goddamn much. That he could take his kindly, knowing looks and patronizing nods and go fuck himself. Game, set, match. Checkmate. She could stand up and walk out the door for the last and final time and catch a bus back across town. She could score and fix and, as she nodded off in a velvety heroin fog, she could congratulate herself on finally finding the backbone to do what she should have done a long damn time ago. Of course, she knows she *won't*. She was never a particularly brave woman, even at her best, and at forty-one Ellison knows that her best is far behind her. Her best is dead and buried. Still, there are days when the fantasy that she *might* is the only thing

that gets her from one excruciating side of these sessions to the other.

The clock ticks. Here we go again.

"How are you doing today?"

The psychiatrist stops staring at the screen of his pad and stares at Ellison instead. The man is at least old enough to be her father. He has great bushy eyebrows that remind her of Gandalf or Walt Whitman. She's wondered if maybe he's one of the shrinks who worked on MK-Ultra or the Stargate Project or some other long-ago covert psychofuck operation or if maybe he has no idea whatsoever who actually writes his checks. Maybe he's exactly who the diplomas on the wall say he is and no more. Maybe he's no one much at all. Possibly, he's the single least interesting man Ellison Nicodemo has ever met and the most subversive thing the psychiatrist ever did was vote for Goldwater in 1972. But it's got to be one or the other. Either he's an agency man following a carefully prepared script, minding protocol to the letter, or he's a patsy who really does believe she isn't anything more exciting than a junkie and a profoundly delusional schizophrenic who only *thinks* she used to be some sort of top-secret occult assassin for a shadow government and *he* only plays the game because the checks don't bounce.

He can't be both or anything in between. Albany has never been one for half measures. In for a penny, in for a pound.

"Last time," he says, "you told me that today maybe we could talk about Atlanta and the scars. Are you still up for that? I understand it's a big step."

Ellison shuts her eyes a moment and tries to recall if she really did say that two weeks back or if he's just banking on there being so little left of her short-term memory that she's not in a position to argue the point.

"Did I?" she asks, opening her eyes again. On the wall behind the psychiatrist there's a cheaply framed print, a copy of an oil painting of a rocky seashore someplace like Rhode Island or Maine or Massachusetts. *Or Wales,* she thinks, and not for the first time. "Well, if I did—if I did tell you that—I shouldn't have. If I did say that, I've changed my mind."

The psychiatrist frowns his consternation and rubs at his bushy white eyebrows. “Are you sure?” he asks her, and she tells him yeah, she’s sure. In fact, she’s very, very sure. “All right, then what would you prefer we talk about today?” he asks. “What about your sister? We never did quite finish with that, did we?”

Ellison almost asks which story about her sister he means, which fabricated version of the truth is it that the psychiatrist would like her to continue with—and, by the way, for the record, she never actually *had* a sister (and the psychiatrist knows that), only an older brother whom she never even met because he died of a fever when he was just a baby. But she *doesn’t* ask. Asking would almost certainly violate the rules of the game, whatever those might be.

“When I was a kid, I got a pet monster,” Ellison says, before she can think better of it, before it occurs to her this is the worst imaginable way of cheating, because, as it happens, she’s telling the truth.

The psychiatrist stops rubbing his eyebrows and clears his throat.

“A monster,” he says—not in a way that dares to sound as if he doubts what she’s told him, but only as if to suggest that maybe he wasn’t paying close attention or perhaps the noise of a delivery truck rattling past down on Livingston Avenue made it hard for him to hear what she said.

“Yeah,” she says, astounded at her own audacity and wishing she had a cigarette, wishing the psychiatrist would let her smoke in his office. “Well, I didn’t really think of it as a monster, not when I was little.”

The psychiatrist opens the bottle of water on his desk and takes a swallow. Then he clears his throat again. “You mean like an imaginary friend?” he asks her, and to Ellison it almost seems as if he’s asking *hopefully*.

“No, I mean like a monster,” she says. “It wasn’t imaginary, and I never thought of it as especially friendly, either. Though, every now and then, it was sort of helpful.”

“Sort of helpful,” says the psychiatrist, and then he taps at his pad before screwing the cap back on the water bottle and setting it aside. “Helpful how, exactly?”

“Like, sometimes it would show up when I was in trouble.”

“If it was helpful, why do you call it a monster?” the psychiatrist wants to know.

Ellison sits up a little straighter, and she glances at the window and the dingy beige drapes hiding the view of the world outside. Her mouth has gone a little cottony, and right now she wouldn’t mind if the psychiatrist deigned to offer her a sip of his water. She says, “It seems to me that the world is full of helpful monsters. I don’t necessarily see a contradiction between monstrosity and usefulness. Some of the most terrible things, the most *hideous* things, we let them into our lives—knowing full well that they’re monsters—because they’re helpful.” She expects the psychiatrist to ask her to pony up an example, but he doesn’t. If he had she might have said nuclear fission, or she might have said religion, or she might have said something else altogether. She might even have said psychiatry, only she isn’t so sure it’s of much use to anyone.

“I see,” says the psychiatrist.

“Do you?” Ellison asks, still watching the drapes. When she arrived for her appointment almost forty-five minutes ago (she’s usually early), the sky was hidden behind a blanket of blue-grey clouds, much as the drapes now hide her view of Arbor Hill. The air had smelled of ozone and the promise of rain. She’ll probably get soaked on the way home, bus or no bus.

Now the psychiatrist is looking at the drapes, too, as if he’s afraid he’s missing something, as if there might be something here he *ought* to see, but doesn’t. He says, “What I mean is, I understand the point that you’re making, about the occasional usefulness of things most people would find monstrous.”

“A lot of people wouldn’t understand,” she tells him, then looks away from the window, looking back at the psychiatrist and the framed seashore. “Or, I don’t know, maybe they would, if they ever had a reason to stop and think about it.”

For a few seconds, neither of them speaks, and then the psychiatrist asks her, “How old were you, the first time you saw this monster?”

It's not too late to make a bad joke of the whole thing, Ellison thinks. *It's not too late to go back to lying and chalk it up to being in a worse mood than usual. He'd believe that.* But then she reminds herself that the psychiatrist possibly doesn't live in a universe that permits the existence of monsters—not real monsters, anyway—and besides, by the unspoken rules of their game, everything she tells him is a lie, every confidence a deception. So it really doesn't much matter what she says.

"I was almost eleven years old. No, wait. That's not right. I was already twelve. I'd already started junior high school. I was in sixth grade the first time I saw the hound."

"The hound?" he asks her. "So, the monster was a dog?"

"No," she replies. "No, it wasn't. It really wasn't anything *like* a dog. But I always thought of it as 'the hound,' right from the beginning. Don't ask me why, because I don't know. I didn't know then, and I don't know now. But I had to think of it as something, you know, and I guess thinking of it as a hound was a lot easier to deal with than acknowledging that it was a monster."

She expects the psychiatrist to make a note of that, but he doesn't. He just watches her, instead.

See, now he's sitting there waiting to hear a proper story. His favorite lunatic has whetted his appetite, and now he wants to know some more. He wants a ripping good yarn. Now he's got a rock-solid hard-on for a scary story from a crazy lady, a story that he can diagnose and dismiss and make not the least bit scary at all. Here, in this office, be no monsters whatsoever. Have another few pills, Ms. Nicodemo. You'll feel better in a day or two, and it's all covered by your insurance, naturally.

"We've talked about how my stepfather beat my mom," she says, and now she keeps her eyes on the painting on the wall behind the psychiatrist. Ellison hates the painting, because of all the awful things it dredges up—Jehosheba and the shark and all the rest. But even those horrors, a *danse macabre* to put Edgar Allan Poe and all his ilk to shame, are somehow easier to face than what she's about to tell the old man with the bushy white eyebrows.

"Yes," says the psychiatrist. "Yes, we have."

“And I told you that he finally stopped. I told you that he stopped after that time he beat her so badly that he put her in the hospital with broken ribs and a concussion.”

“You did.” The psychiatrist nods.

“Well, that wasn’t the truth.”

“He didn’t stop hitting your mother?”

“No, he stopped, but that isn’t *why* he stopped. He stopped after the first time the hound came. It was a Friday or Saturday night. I’m not sure which, but I remember I was up late because I didn’t have school the next day, and my stepfather came in drunk. My mother said something to him. I don’t remember that, either, just what it was she said, but it doesn’t matter. Probably something she should have known was gonna set him off. I imagine by then she didn’t much care anymore. By then, she probably knew she’d get hit no matter what she did or didn’t say. Anyway, she said it, and he knocked her down. We were in the living room. I was on the floor in front of the TV, and when he hit her, she stumbled backwards and tripped over the coffee table. Mom landed right next to me. Her lip was bleeding. She lay there staring up at him, sort of smiling, like she was daring him to keep it up. She didn’t even look at me. It’s almost like I wasn’t there.”

Ellison is quiet for a moment, concentrating on the painting of the sea, the waves battering that rocky shore, the white cottage that seems as if it’s about be swallowed up by the tide, shivered and dashed apart and washed away.

“It’s fine if you’d like to stop here for now,” says the psychiatrist, but she knows he doesn’t mean it. And even if he does, she’s gone too far to turn back, and wasn’t that always the way of it? Isn’t that something the Signalman said to her once, ages and ages ago, that she had a way of getting in too deep too fast, like she was afraid if she didn’t jump in both feet first she might never jump in at all?

“It’s okay,” she says. “I’m fine.”

“Then continue,” says the psychiatrist, as if Ellison needs his permission.

“She was lying there, and he was standing over her, and I sorta think he really meant to kill her that time. And so maybe he’d have

had to kill me, too, because I would have seen him do it, and my stepfather, he was terrified of going to prison. His own dad had—never mind, that's a different story. There was my mom, and there I was, and suddenly I heard this sound, and I smelled something like—well, to tell you the truth, it wasn't like anything I'd ever smelled in my life. But it was a *cold* sort of smell, you know? That night, sitting there on the floor waiting for him to kill her, I thought how it was a smell that could have only come from some very cold place, like Antarctica or outer space or"

. . . the bottom of the sea . . .

"someplace like that. And then the hound was there, standing over my mom. It was big. I mean fucking *huge*. One minute it hadn't been there, the next it was, but I thought maybe it had come in through an open window, and I was so scared I just hadn't noticed."

"The hound?" asks the psychiatrist.

"Yeah," says Ellison. "The hound."

"But it didn't *look* like a hound."

"Not even a little bit," she tells him, not taking her eyes off the painting. "Back in 2005, when the agency headhunter recruited me, they already knew about the hound. That's *why* they recruited me. But still, they'd never seen it for themselves. They would, later on, soon enough, but they hadn't yet that day. Anyway, I honestly tried to describe it for them, until I realized that I might as well have been trying to describe the color pink to Stevie Wonder."

"But that night, your stepfather saw it. And your mother."

Ellison nods. "Yeah. He shit himself. I mean he *literally* shit his pants. And then he ran away and we never saw the son of a bitch again. He didn't even call or come back for his stuff or anything. He was just *gone*." And Ellison snaps her fingers for extra added emphasis. "Mom, she lay there on the floor, and she didn't really look scared. Me on the other hand, I was *plenty* boo coo scared, because I figured this *thing,* this *monster,* that had jumped in through the window and frightened off my drunken stepfather was about to devour the both of us."

The psychiatrist scratches his eyebrows. "But it didn't," he says.

"Well, obviously," says Ellison, wishing he'd stop interrupting and let her finish. "It looked down at Mom, and then it sorta looked over at me. And I say 'it looked,' but that's only because I don't know how to explain what it *really* did. And then it vanished again, leaving behind that cold smell and these smears of blue slime where it had been standing. It would take Mom days to scrub that stuff up off the floor, and even then there would always be a stain. Anyway, that night I crawled over to her, and we sat there a real long time, holding each other and crying, waiting for my stepfather to show up again and kill us, or for the monster to reappear and eat us. I think we must have sat there almost until dawn. And that was the very first time I saw my monster, the hound."

Ellison stops staring at the painting and allows herself to look at the psychiatrist again. He doesn't seem nearly as surprised as she might have expected. But he also doesn't look as if he buys a word she's said. Why would he? He knows the rules of the game.

This is a true story.

Every word I say is a lie.

"It's okay," she says. "I wouldn't believe me, either."

"I didn't *say* that I don't believe you," the psychiatrist tells her, and then the clock on the wall above the office door ticks especially loud, and Ellison glances up to see that it's only five minutes after two.

"How are you doing today?" the psychiatrist wants to know, and he swipes two fingers across his pad and clears his throat. Before she answers, he asks, "Are you about ready to begin?"

She squeezes her eyes shut, and she imagines she hears the Signalman.

"Your move, kiddo. We don't have all day. Not much point belaboring strategies you know perfectly damn well you're too cowardly to even attempt."

"Sure," Ellison Nicodemo tells the psychiatrist, and she opens her eyes, and the game begins again.

5.: The World Before Later On

(Ynys Llanddwyn, Wales, January 18, 2018)

Someone up ahead is going to call me a sadist. I put my hands tightly over my ears and I can hear that, plain as day. I will be called a sadist by the choirboys in blue and the men in tinfoil hats and the spooks from Groom Lake, because one thing may look very much like another, unless motive is taken into account. They will trot out great reams of psychobabble and the terror of comfortingly orthodox diagnoses and file me and dismiss me. Throw away the key, if they get their wish. Send me down to some cell in their Ant Farm labyrinth and throw away the key. A bullet to the brain, if I am only lucky. Anyway, I uncover my ears again and all I can hear now is the rain, the soothing winter rain and the voices woven into the rain. The rain, which is, by extension, merely the sea. There is nothing worth hearing that is *not* the sea. I know that so damn well, like I know the beat of my heart and the moment of my death, and yet I allow myself to be distracted by things that will be said in days yet to come by all those self-important phantoms of no consequence and no significance. I sit in my grey room in this cottage by the restless sea, and I sit before the looking glass that was my mother's, and I will *listen* to the sea, not to all those roiling futures that are still being born by my hand and by the will of Father Kraken and Mother Hydra, the indeterminate determination of R'lyeh, the mermaid's whisper, the yelp of waves breaking on basalt boulders down more than four billion years. In the mirror, I hold one finger to my lips, before I say too much. My skin is the color of fog. My eyes shine like polished copper pennies. And I know they will say that I am a sadist. It shouldn't bother me, but it does. There is nothing in this room but my chair at the center of its maze drawn on the floor, nothing but the looking glass and the drapes that hide the windows, a single bare

electric bulb shining above me, and the whisperer in the corner. I won't speak the name of the whisperer, but she has been with me a very long time now, and she knows so many of my secrets. There have been many lovers since her murder, but her jealousy eclipses all those other passions. "Why won't you ever say my name?" she wants to know, and I keep my eyes on my reflection. I keep my eyes on me. "You took so much, but you didn't take my name, not you and not the sea and not all the voices of the sea and all the sea's many gods, none of you stole my name. None of you were able to do that." I'd cover my ears again, but it wouldn't do any good. The whisperer seeps through mere flesh, like water through cheesecloth. I almost tell the whisperer that I never tried to take her name, but there's that cautionary finger, to seal my blue lips. Outside it's raining, and it's either daylight or night, and I am in this room and I am with the whisperer and my own face in silvered glass and the certainty that one day they will see me as nothing more than a sadist and a lunatic. "Maximum disruptive contrast," says the whisperer in her rheumy, salt-rime voice. "Countershading, markings, of whatever sort, tend to *obliterate,* to cancel, by their separate and conflicting patterns, the visibility of the details and boundaries of form, and so one thing is mistaken for another, an octopus for a handful of sand and gravel, a fish for a coral branch. A martyr for a sadist. And anyway, what difference does it make to you, how they judge the monster that you are?" I want to reply that I'm not a monster, any more than I am a sadist, but once I give the whisperer the satisfaction and validation of a reply, well, I know where that always, always leads. Better I seal my lips and keep my thoughts to myself and my eyes on the looking glass and suffer myself to silence. She tells me, "For what you've done, Jehosheba, they're coming for you. For everything you'll do. You're being hunted again. You should have kept your head down. They thought you were done for. They thought you'd gone away, so much flotsam and jetsam dragged off with the tide. But they know better now." I don't respond. I'm trying to remember what day this is, what day in what year, and I'm wishing it were the day before I led the whisperer into the icy sea below Tŵr Bach lighthouse and held her head beneath the water until she stopped spitting up bubbles and

there was no more breath left in her. Then I might have a little peace, just until the moment of her drowning finds me out. Before the Father and the Mother, I'm not trying to shirk my duties. I'm only trying to hear myself think. From her corner, the whisperer laughs and makes a noise like a damp mop slapped against a wall. *Be still,* I want to say. *Be still and be quiet and let me listen to the rain.* But I don't say that or anything else. I hold a finger to my lips, and with my other hand, my *left* hand, I make a fist and clutch the stone become the graven image of my fate and the fate of all my lovers and the rhythm of the tides and the towers of sunken cities. "They're coming for you," the whisperer says again, "and they're coming very, very soon, all the way from halfway around the world. And I will not shed a tear." My fisted hand bleeds water, my heart's own stigmata, the mark of Y'ha-nthlei and Our Lady of Perpetual Midnight. "There's a hole in the bottom of the sea," says the whisperer. "And that's where they're going to put you, Jehosheba, for all the things that you've done. There's a hole in the bottom of the sea, the tolling bell, the whine in the rigging, and that's where you'll sleep away the aeons, little lobster." The water drips from my fist, the blood that is the water that is the life, and it spatters the floorboards at my feet. It spatters the lines and causeways of the maze so meticulously painted there. All the world unfolding is in that map, all *this* present world and all those *other* past and future worlds, and you only have to know how to read it. With each lover, I learned a little more. With each little life I commended to the deep, the Father and the Mother opened my eyes that much more to the glory and the wonder and the pageant of twisting, twining moments. Each life that I have taken is strung like pearls within the maze, and every drop of water from my clenched fist will become another pearl. "You'll pay for every one of us," the whisperer promises me. "Soon, you'll be served your comeuppance, for all those sins and stolen lives, and they'll call you a sadist." Even though I have loved them all, and even though I have never taken even an instant's pleasure in their pain. "Yes," mutters the whisperer, "even though all that might well be true. You'll pay. You'll see, Jehosheba." On the floor, the saltwater that has dripped from my hand rolls to and fro along the maze until it arrives at the

moment past when I drowned the whisperer, and it lingers there, while I'm dragging her naked, sodden, limp body from the bay and up onto the rocks again. Above us, the foghorn bleats and just offshore a bell buoy clangs its meaningless answers. The stars wheel overhead, a hurricane of pinpricks in the dome of Heaven, and I take great care not to look up. I shiver, bite my bleeding lips, and I do my work, putting it all in motion, so that one day I will sit here in this room before this mirror, so that one day I shall paint a maze upon the floor of this room, so that one day I will place an inconstant, loveless Jonah in the belly of a great fucking fish, so that all will be revealed in the fullness of time and the abyss. There on the rocks beneath Tŵr Bach, I kissed the whisperer's dead lips. I laid a small white sand dollar on her forehead. I covered each nipple with a limpet, and I arranged a wheel of whelks and periwinkles and marsh snails on her belly. I hid her sex with a kindly handful of knotted wrack. I did exactly as I had been instructed. And down in the sea a million upturned eyes shone their approval. I left her there for the crabs and the gulls and the maggots. I left her there for the tide to drag away to the hungry children of the Mother and the Father. Within the maze on the floor at my feet, drops of water from my hand roll away from that night to other nights and other sacrifices, and each of them I loved as much as I'd loved the whisperer in her turn. I sit in my chair, and I kneel on sharp limestone at the edge of Bae Malltraeth and drift in utter darkness twenty-one hundred fathoms down. Sitting in my chair before the looking glass, sinking through hadopelagic depths that have never been insulted and bruised by the scalding insult of the sun, feeding the maze, I am shown everything that has been and all that is still to come. I have opened so many doors, doors within myself and doors in the fabric of creation. I am ushering in the flood. I am waking the Sleeper in His ancient sepulcher. A swarm of trilobites and viperfish weave a holy shroud about me. In her corner, the whisperer reminds me what a fool I am, like every other saint who ever lived. I wish I knew the words to banish her. I wish I knew that spell. But even she has a part to play, like the irritating grain of sand to worry the oyster to grow the pearls that spill from my hand to roll along the pathways of a

maze painted on a floor in a cottage by the sea. The whisperer says, "You should have killed her when you had the chance, my own and gentle salmon. Like you undid *me,* you should have undone *her,* made of her only a torn seine, a shattered lobsterpot, a broken oar. Was she really so much more beautiful? Did you really love her so much more?" And I almost reply. I go so far as to open my mouth, and I very nearly speak the words—*I would show you the whole of it, if I were but allowed to do that. Then you'd see. There's a wing on the fly on the frog on the bump on the log in the hole in the bottom of the sea, and I would show you all of it, my love, and then you'd know your death was not in vain. I would show you the drowned lands rising above the waves, and I would show you all the dry lands sinking into the vault of the sea. I would show you the stations of my cross. I would not be so alone, if you could see it, too.* The whisperer laughs as if she's read my mind and isn't buying any of it. Not one whit. I open my hand and look down at the stone carving, the graven image of the Mother. The whisperer is threatening to set *all* my ghosts free, but I know that she'd have done that by now, if she were capable of such a thing. The whisperer laughs and makes a slithering sound. I drift deeper, and the stone in my hand glows like the bioluminescent lure of an anglerfish, light for my eyes only, light that owes nothing to the sun, light born of chemosynthesis and hydrothermal vents. I sink, and the one whom I could not kill rises from an asphalt runway to sail among the clouds. She stinks of the poppy's venom in her blood. She stinks of incremental, sour deaths. Nothing is happening that I have not set in motion. All of this was planned. If I *were* a sadist, I would *say* these things aloud and with these truths taunt the whisperer who taunts me. I would torture the whisperer and take some small relief from the necessary *masochism* of my every act. Instead, I clench my hand tightly around the stone again, and around me and within me the grey room fills up with the absolute stillness of a hole in the bottom of the sea, and the pressure of a thousand atmospheres would crush me flat, were it not for the invisible fist clenched about me.

6.: The Lady and the Tiger Go To Hell

(Somewhere West of Denver, December 1956)

My Dearest Ruth,
I'm beginning this as the train pulls out of Union Station. The day is bright and sunny, though it snowed here last night, and I imagine it's as fine a way to spend a Christmas Eve as any, being ferried on steel rails through the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. I'll post the letter when we reach Grand Junction, and then I'll be traveling on to Sacramento. I have quite a lot of work to do before the semester begins. I hope that you're well, and I hope this holiday season finds you in all ways better than did the last.

When I spoke with Sarah Beringer in Chicago last week, she was emphatic that I write and tell you of my encounter with Marquardt and her woman, though I can't imagine I have anything to say that will prove useful to anyone who's had as much firsthand experience with those two as have you. I'm also not especially keen to revisit that autumn evening in Providence. It still, on occasion, gives me nightmares. I've awakened in a cold sweat from dreams of the gathering on Benefit Street. Regardless, I promised Sarah that I would write, and I do hope that I may be of some help to you, no matter how small. I trust, of course, your discretion in this matter, and I trust that what I write here will be kept strictly between the two of us.

As you know already, as Sarah has told you, I met Marquardt through an acquaintance, an anthropologist formerly on faculty in the Dept. of Archeology at Brown. He has asked that I please omit his name from any and all accounts I may write on the subject of Dr. Adelie Marquardt,

and I am bound by our friendship to oblige him. It matters only that he knew of my interest in Dagon and in Semitic Mesopotamian fertility gods in general and that, through him, the fateful introduction was made, following a lecture at Manning Hall. That was on the afternoon of October 12th of last year, and it was there that I was invited to the gathering on Benefit Street. I admit that I found Marquardt personable enough on our initial meeting. Certainly, she's striking, just shy of six feet tall; the sort of woman I do not hesitate to term handsome. I don't mean in any way mannish, but handsome. The sort of woman for whom I've always had a weakness. From what I've gathered, she excels at making good first impressions, the same way, I think, that a pitcher plant excels at seducing hungry insects. Aggressive mimicry, as the evolutionists say. Her grey eyes, her easy smile, her immediate interest in whomever she's speaking to, the authority in her voice, and yet, I also confess to feeling the faintest inkling of apprehension when we shook hands. I can't say why. I mean, I don't know why. The vestige of some primal survival instinct, perhaps, something meant to keep us safe that human beings have, to our detriment, forgotten how to recognize for what it is.

Her companion was not with her that day, and I gather that's fairly unusual, seeing the two of them apart. I wouldn't meet her until the evening of the gathering.

"I know your work," Dr. Marquardt told me. "Your article in Acta Archaeologica on the Septuagint's account of the destruction of the idol in the temple of Dagon in Ashdod. I read that. Fascinating stuff."

Now, if you wish to flatter me, Ruth, and gain some measure of my trust, you have only to claim a passing familiarity with my research. I'm easy that way, as, I suspect, are most academics laboring in obscure and esoteric fields of study.

"I have something I'd very much like you to see," she continued. "A piece I'm told was recovered from the ruins at

Ras Shamra during Claude Schaeffer's excavations there in 1929. It's been hidden away in a private collection for decades, so you won't find it in the literature anywhere." She told me that no one seemed to know why the artifact in question hadn't gone to Strasbourg with the rest of Schaeffer's material.

"If it's genuine," said Marquardt, "it's very important, indeed."

I told her I looked forward to seeing it, thanked her for the invitation, and we parted ways. I spent most of the next week up at Harvard, at both the Semitic Museum and the Peabody. My department's endowment is modest (some would say meager), and it isn't often I have the opportunity to visit institutions back East. As is always the case when I can travel, I was determined to make my stay as productive as possible, wringing the most from every waking hour, even if it meant wearing myself down to a frazzle. Which I promptly did. By the evening of Dr. Marquardt's gathering, which was Friday the 29th, I was exhausted, and I very nearly begged off. Of course, in hindsight, heeding the wishes of my exhausted mind and body would have proven the most fortunate course. I'd not now be writing you this letter, and my sleep would not be so frequently interrupted by bad dreams. My nerves would not be always on edge. Hindsight, though, is rarely more than a cruel voice, taunting us from the shadows.

I showered, got dressed, and walked from my room at Miller Hall to an old slatboard house at 135 Benefit. It's built partway into the steep hill, with the basement opening out onto the street, and has been painted a ghastly shade of yellow. I've read it was constructed in 1763 by a Providence merchant named Stephen Harris, who fell on hard times almost as soon as the house was completed. Therefore, naturally, it has a reputation as a cursed house. I'd been told to arrive at 6 p.m. sharp, so the sun was well down by the time I reached the address. A housemaid greeted me at the

door, and I found to my surprise that the gathering was already in full swing.

The maid took my coat and ushered me from the foyer down a narrow hallway to a spacious drawing room. The air was smoky and redolent with the commingled odors of cigarettes, cologne, and perfume. Adelie Marquardt spotted me almost at once, and I was immediately introduced to her companion, Ecaterina, for whom I never got more than a first name. She was a very pretty woman, dark-eyed and her hair black as coal, and I must confess that she and Marquardt made quite a dashing couple. She's from Bucharest, the companion, and she spoke with a heavy Romanian accent.

"I trust you had no trouble finding the house?" asked Marquardt, and I assured her that I'd had no trouble whatsoever. "Good," she said, "good. I don't yet know Providence well myself, and I confess I still get turned around from time to time."

"Am I late?" I asked, looking about the crowded room.

"No, no. You're right on time," she said. "You're fine, my dear."

Another servant arrived, this one with a silver tray of fluted glasses, and she offered me champagne. I took a glass, though I've never much cared for the taste.

Marquardt had begun explaining how she and Ecaterina had met in Paris, four years earlier, but I was, at best, only half listening. My attention had been drawn to the other guests, of whom there were at least fifteen or so. Ruth, when I say that they were an odd lot, I'm not exaggerating. I know that I have a reputation for being something of a prude; I've never kept company with Beatniks and Bohemians and whatnot, but I think even your beloved Kerouac and Ginsberg would have been taken aback by this outré bunch. Most were women, and there was a definite effeminacy about the few men in attendance, both in manner and appearance. I would say there was a conscious, purposeful

outrageousness to the way these people dressed and carried themselves. They reminded me of a flock of some peculiar species of songbird, birds whose feathers are far too gaudy to be beautiful and whose bodies are so ungainly that one wonders how it is they manage ever to fly.

"Well, would you like to see it now?" asked Dr. Marquardt. "The artifact from Ras Shamra?"

I might have said yes. Or I might only have nodded. I can't remember. But I do recall that, just then, I noticed a young man, down on his knees before the fireplace. He was entirely naked, save a crown of ivy set on his head and a red cloth tied about his face for a blindfold. His lips and cheeks had been rouged, and his head was bowed slightly, so that I couldn't clearly see his face. A woman stood on either side of him, each dressed in gold and garish shades of red. Each held a silver chalice. I started to say something, to ask for some explanation of this bizarre tableau vivant, when Marquardt said, "Oh, don't be shocked, my dear. It's only a bit of sport. We like our games, you know."

All this time later, little details still keep coming back to me. For example, it was just a few weeks ago that I remembered the huge old Victrola in the drawing room, and that the record on the turntable was Hoagy Carmicheal's "Stardust." That was a favorite of my mother's, and it was also one of the first songs I learned to play on the piano (I gave up music after high school). Oh, and the roses. I've not mentioned them. There were bouquets of rosebuds placed all about the room, arranged in reproductions of Ming vases. There must have been a hundred roses that night, but not a single one of them had opened. Their petals had been dyed blue, Mohammedan blue to match the blue of the porcelain vases. I'm digressing. But all of these details, and so many others that I don't have time to include here, somehow they added up to a singular wrongness, as if the room in that yellow house at 135 Benefit had been carefully decorated so as to achieve a very specific and disorienting effect.

There were pocket doors separating the drawing room from a small book-lined study, and Marquardt slid the doors open and ushered me inside. Ecaterina followed, and then Marquardt pulled the doors shut again, muffling the music and the voices of the other guests. In the center of the room was a small table, a scallop-topped tea table, and the thing that she'd invited me to that house to see sat alone at its center. When I saw it, I think I actually gasped.

Were I writing to almost anyone else, Ruth, instead of to you, instead of to someone who has had firsthand experience with these people, I think that might sound hysterical. But yes, I must have gasped. And this seemed to please both Marquardt and her companion. They exchanged a smile, and I had the distinct impression that they were sharing some secret, like the punchline of a joke to which I'd not been privy.

"Remarkable, isn't it?" said Marquardt. "The craftsmanship is exquisite. And obviously it isn't actually Ugaritic, despite its provenance. Likely, it came to Ras Shamra from Egypt, possibly during the reign of Amenemhat III, sometime after 1814 BC. According to Schaeffer's field notes, this piece was found in association with a stela depicting the pharaoh."

For a few moments, then, I forgot Marquardt and her companion and their strange guests. I forgot about the blue roses and the naked boy kneeling at the hearth. For those few moments, the statuette on the table completely consumed my attention. Yes, the craftsmanship was exquisite, but there was nothing of beauty about the object. It was in all ways hideous. If I say it was wicked, would you understand my meaning? I think you might, knowing what you know and having seen what you've seen. The statuette was a wicked thing. And vile. And yet I found myself unable to look away from it.

"It isn't Dagon," I said finally. "Whatever else it's meant to be, it clearly isn't an image of Dagon."

"I agree," said Marquardt. "Obviously. Are you familiar with the early Sumerian and the later Assyro-Babylonian texts that suggest Dagon, or Dagan, had a wife? And that the wife may have been the goddess—"

"Of course," I said, interrupting her. That isn't like me, interrupting anyone. But suddenly I was dizzy and my mouth had gone cottony. I took a sip of champagne and stared at the hideous statuette. "But this isn't Ishara."

"No, it isn't. But in Schaeffer's notes, there's a description of something he calls 'Mother Hydra,' and it's accompanied by a sketch of this artifact. He says that when one of his workers uncovered the figurine, all the men fled in terror, and that only after it had been removed from the site would they return to the diggings."

"So, if it didn't go to Strasbourg, where did it end up?" I asked.

"As I said, a private collection. It appears that Schaeffer sold it to a Frenchman, Absolon Thibault Moreau, who'd been a student of Helena Blavatsky's when he was hardly more than a boy. Moreau was obsessed with the various myths and traditions concerning sunken continents—Atlantis, Lemuria, Mu, and so forth—and he believed that the Phoenicians knew of a submerged land in the South Pacific called R'lyeh. He also believed that the god Dagon had originated in R'lyeh, and that the god's consort, this—" and Marquardt waved a hand at the statuette, "still dwelt there, waiting for a coming apocalypse—a great flood, to be precise, that would herald the resurrection of a still mightier being than either Dagon or his wife."

There was a sharp knock at the doors, then, and Ecaterina slid them open just enough to whisper with whoever was on the other side.

"So, if it went to this Moreau fellow," I said, "how did it come into your possession?" I'd taken a step nearer the table and the statuette, and as much as I wanted to be away from

the thing, I also wanted to pick it up, to hold it, to know the weight of it in my hands. I imagined it would feel oily.

"He was arrested for murder," she said. "Eight murders, to be precise. The bodies were found buried on his estate, just outside Avignon. There were allegations of cannibalism, but nothing was ever proven."

Just then there was a terrific commotion from the drawing room. Someone cried out—an awful sound, like a cornered, hurting animal—and my mind returned at once to the blindfolded boy at the fireplace. Ecaterina quickly pulled the pocket doors shut again. She glanced over her shoulder and muttered something in Romanian. At least, I assumed it was Romanian. And I saw, or more likely I only imagined that I saw, a reddish iridescent shimmer in the woman's eyes, like the eyeshine from a wild animal. And I thought, I do not believe in werewolves, but if I did, then I would believe without hesitation that's exactly what this woman is.

Then Adelie Marquardt took my elbow, and she said, "You must leave now. I do apologize, but there's an urgent matter that requires my attention. I regret the inconvenience." The way she said this, it seemed exactly as if she were reading a prepared and carefully worded statement. She nodded to a small door opposite the tea table, a door I hadn't noticed. "That will lead you back out to the street. It's best you hurry."

And I did hurry. I found that I wanted—more than I'd ever wanted anything, I think—to be out of that house and away from those strange people and that wicked statuette. Somewhere above us, bells had begun to chime; they sounded very much like buoy bells. I exited the study, followed a narrow, musty hallway, and was soon out on Benefit Street again, looking back from the safety of a flickering pool of gaslight. I'm not sure how long I stood there by the lamppost, my heart racing, regarding Stephen Harris's unlucky yellow house. Five minutes? Ten? And then I went back to Miller Hall. I left the lights burning until dawn, and I didn't sleep. I left Providence the next day, three days earlier than I'd

planned, and was grateful to be on my way back to California.

I will add one last thing, and then I'll close. Two weeks or so after that night, I received by mail an envelope containing a clipping from the Providence Journal. There was no return address, and I have no idea who sent it, but there was a Boston postmark. On November 5th, a week after Marquardt's gathering, a body was found floating in the Seekonk River, not so far from the yellow house. The nude body of a young man. His tongue had been cut out, as had his eyes.

As I said, I'll post this from Grand Junction. Be safe, dear Ruth. Please stay away from that woman.

Yours Truly,
Ysabeau

7.: Black Ops Alt (#friendlyskies)

(Over Monument Valley, Utah, January 18, 2018)

Thirty-five thousand feet up, Ellison Nicodemo wakes from a dream of drowning. She opens her eyes and squints and blinks painfully at the pale blue sky, at the white stratus and cumulus clouds, and at all the shades of terra-cotta red and brown, ochre yellow and sage green that are the desert laid out far below. The cabin of the Beechcraft King Air B200 is drenched with cold, bright morning sunlight spilling in through twelve circular portholes. Kitty Wells is singing and there's the smell of coffee and leather upholstery. Ellison's throat and mouth are parched, her eyes gummy from the pressurized, recirculated air of the plane, and her tongue feels like the bins of whole dried fish at the Korean market a few doors down from her shithole apartment back in Los Angeles. Her sinuses ache, and there's a vague, unfamiliar sort of nausea stirring in her belly, a touch of airsickness; she hasn't flown in years.

She sits up and stares at her reflection in the window, superimposed on the western sky. She's wearing the new clothes they gave her back at LAAFB, more or less standard-issue agency threads—a black leather blazer, white dress shirt and black slacks, and a pair of inexpensive-looking black block-heel pumps. After she was dressed, the Signalman gave her a silver-and-turquoise bolo tie, and she's wearing that, too. There's a chunky Timex digital watch on her right wrist, so she knows that it's 8:24 a.m., and there's a Glock 17M 9mm tucked snug inside a shoulder holster—just like the bad old days, and never mind that she hasn't fired a gun since 2011.

All around her, the airplane thrums like a gigantic insect that's eaten her alive. It's not a pleasant thought, and she pushes it away.

"I need something to drink," she mutters, her voice hardly more than a raw, hoarse whisper, and then she sees the bottle of National

Bohemian waiting obligingly in her cup holder.

"Well, will you look at that," says the Signalman. "Sleeping Beauty awakes. And here I figured you'd be sawing logs all the way to Omaha." He's sitting across the narrow aisle from Ellison and two rows forward, his back to the cockpit doors, facing the female agent who watched on while Ellison endured a rushed medical evaluation and a round of inoculations, Mackenzie something or another Irish—Rourke. O'Riordan, Reilly . . .

Mackenzie *Regan,* she remembers.

Yeah, that's right.

She's too pretty, that one, too young and fresh-faced, entirely too sober and unscarred, someone who would look more at home teaching elementary school than running with the likes of the Signalman. Then again, Ellison Nicodemo learned a long time ago just exactly how deceiving looks can truly be. Best to withhold judgment. Always best to wait and see. For all Ellison knows, Mackenzie Regan might be the meanest motherfucker alive, a regular intergalactic samurai badass, facing the death sentence in twelve star systems, yada, yada, yada.

Ellison twists the cap off the bottle of beer and takes a long swallow, clears her throat, wipes her mouth on the back of her hand, and belches. Mackenzie Regan turns her head, looking over her shoulder and sparing half a forced, distasteful smile before focusing her attention once more on the documents and photographs and maps spread out on the little table between herself and the Signalman.

"We just crossed the Arizona-Utah border," he says to Ellison and nods at his window. "Look down there, kiddo, and you'll see the patch of buttes and dust and rattlesnakes that John Ford made famous. If the Duke has a ghost, I'd wager green folding money that's where you'd find it." And then he winks at her and lights a cigarette, which saves Ellison the trouble of having to ask if she can smoke on the flight.

"I thought you fucking hated planes," she says, then clears her throat again. "I thought with you it was railways and highways or no

ways at all. I thought you'd rather eat the peanuts out of a pile of pig shit than get on an airplane."

The Signalman watches her and rubs his salt-and-pepper stubbled chin. It doesn't look as if he's shaved since the day before. Or maybe the day before that.

"And I thought I'd find you healthy and clean, living it up on the banks of the Vltava," he replies. "You wanna tell me again why it is I didn't?" And then to Mackenzie Regan, he says, "That's in Prague, the River Vltava," and she sighs and tells him she knew that already.

Ellison frowns and lets the matter drop. She finds a shiny new Zippo and a half-empty pack of Chesterfields in the breast pocket of the blazer. She lights one and stares at the sky for almost a whole minute before asking, "How long was I out?"

"Not too long," the Signalman replies. "Since just before takeoff. An hour and a half, more or less. I warned you that was some potent shit, not like that nickel-and-dime skag you've been shooting."

"Yeah," she mutters around the filter of her cigarette. "You warned me."

Kitty Wells is replaced by Connie Francis, "Who's Sorry Now." The plane might belong to Albany, but it's sure as shit the Signalman's mixtape.

Ellison finishes the beer and sets the empty bottle back into the cup holder. She wants to ask if she can get another and is debating whether or not that's a bad idea, trying to guess just how deep the Signalman's indulgence runs, when he holds up a manila folder so she can see, then taps it with an index finger. There's an identical folder lying on the otherwise empty seat next to her, and she nods at him, picks up the folder, and opens it. Inside, there's a thin sheaf of typed pages held together with a red plastic paper clip. *Typed,* she notes (and on onionskin), *not* a computer printout, because Albany has never trusted computers for these sorts of things and likely never will. The cover sheet is stamped with green ink, COSMIC TOP SECRET and EYES ONLY and so on and so forth. Ellison takes a drag on her Chesterfield, then turns to the second page. And here, assembled in a terse, itemized list, are all the many reasons that the agency has sent

the Signalman to yank her back into the fold, all the horrors and unlikelihoods that add up to this moment, to her sitting in this seat on this plane, racing through the sky above a cowboy-movie landscape of towering sandstone buttes and cowboy-movie phantoms.

"I'm going to need another beer for this," Ellison says, because, really, the worst he can do is say no. She shuts her eyes, trying to scrape together a few stingy shreds of courage and summon some measure of backbone from the heroin's deceitful, warm embrace. When she opens her eyes again, the empty bottle's gone and there's a fresh Natty Boh in the cup holder. Its already been opened for her. The Signalman is standing now, stooped slightly so he can gaze out one of the circular windows.

"You don't have to read it all at once," he says. "You've got some time. But I do need you to read *all* of it, kiddo. And then we'll talk."

Ellison takes a swallow of the cold malt liquor, wipes her mouth, then looks back down at the folder in her lap, the bloody-red paper clip, the crisp typed pages, the bizarre catalog of atrocities lined up all neat and tidy for her careful consideration. The life and times and not quite unspeakable sins of a Welsh woman named Jehosheba Talog, the only assignment Ellison Nicodemo never finished, the only one who ever got away.

"To tell you the truth," says the Signalman, "after what happened in Atlanta, I thought maybe she'd crawled off somewhere to lick her wounds and . . . whatever. Swum away home like a good pollywog to King Neptune's stately pleasure palace or just fucking died. What the fuck ever it is people like her do when they've finally done the world all the mischief they can manage. I honestly thought we'd heard the last of her."

After what happened in Atlanta . . .

Ellison glances down at the scars on her hands, then shuts her eyes again.

"No, you didn't," she says, so softly that the words are almost lost in the low, rumbling purr of the King Air's twin turbine engines. "You didn't think that for a minute. So why bother lying to me about it?"

When he doesn't answer the question, Ellison opens her eyes and goes back to staring at (but not *reading*) the contents of the manila folder. It's not like she really expects an answer.

"Anyway," the Signalman says finally, "read it. Maybe you'll see some kinda pattern there we're missing. Maybe it'll make more sense to you. We're refueling at Offutt, then flying on to Quonset Point."

"And there's nothing the least bit portentous about making a pit stop at the birthplace of the *Enola Gay*."

"I stopped thinking like that a long, long time ago," says the Signalman. "You have to, or you wind up seeing the face of Jesus in every bowl of breakfast cereal."

"But that's pretty much what you want *me* to do, isn't it?" she asks him and points at the dossier.

"No, it's *not*. All I want you to do . . ." But he trails off and sighs and quietly massages his temples and eyelids a moment before continuing. "No one ever got as close to her as you did. At least no one who's still walking around and breathing."

"Well, I'm not a profiler, either," Ellison reminds him.

"Look, I'm not saying I believe you can read that file and tell me what the bitch is going to do next. Just that maybe you'll see something the rest of us have missed. Something. Anything. And the sooner we find her, the sooner we can put this one to bed for good. Before more people die. Before she wakes up something we don't know how to put back to sleep or blow to smithereens or banish to whatever shithole banana republic dimension she's called it forth from."

"And, after all, if I hadn't fucked this up seven years ago . . ."

"That's *not* what I said, kiddo. That's not at all what I just said. Listen, as long as the hound still comes when it's called, that's mostly all they care about."

"I guess we'll find out, won't we?"

The Signalman sighs and looks away from the window.

"Just do what you can," he says, and she can hear his exasperation as clearly as she can see the sheen of sweat on his face. She wonders if he'll make it to Offutt without having to use one of the airsickness bags. "Just do your best, given the circumstances."

"When has Albany ever been happy with that?" she asks him, and the Signalman scowls and goes back to his seat. Mackenzie Regan mutters something Ellison can't quite make out, and the Signalman tells her to play nice and mind her own damn business. Ellison starts to ask if times have really gotten so hard that TPTB have started hitting up the steno pool for new talent, but then she thinks better of it. It might bring a smile to her face, poking the bear and all, but then again, it might not, and the folder would still be right there in her lap, lying in wait, ready to snap shut like a steel-jaw trap.

The plane bumps and shudders for a moment, passing through some invisible wrinkle in the sky, some harmless pocket of clear-air turbulence, and Ellison glances over at the Signalman. His teeth are clenched and he's holding on to the armrests for dear life. She imagines she can hear his molars grinding and his stomach rolling. She looks back down at the dossier. She doesn't like seeing him like this.

She takes another swallow of beer.

Fine, she thinks. *I will read these things. Hell, I'll read them twice, three times, but I won't see shit, and pretty soon they'll figure out I'm useless and send me packing. So read the file, get it over with, go the fuck home.*

The second page of the dossier begins with a brief account of a thirty-two car pileup on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, just outside of Harrisburg. A sixty-five foot sperm whale had appeared, *ex nihilo,* in the westbound lane. The whale had still been alive when first responders arrived on the scene.

The plane hits another pocket of rough air, worse than the last, and she glances up at the Signalman again. He's doing a piss-poor job of pretending that he's neither ill nor terrified. Ellison finishes her second beer, takes a last drag on her Chesterfield, smoked almost down to the filter, then drops the butt into the empty bottle. She imagines a faint, brief sizzle, even if she doesn't actually hear one. She sets the bottle back in the cup holder before turning her attention once more to the typescript—the unfortunate, impossible sperm whale on I-76, twelve people dead, and so on and so forth.

And then a single drop of water falls onto the paper in her lap. More annoyed than surprised, Ellison Nicodemo sits staring at it for four or five seconds, as the ink begins to run, before she looks up to see where it could have come from.

8.: In Power We Entrust the Love Advocated

(Ynys Llanddwyn, Wales, November 27, 1972)

Almost every evening now, the dark man comes to see the girl named Abishag Talog. Almost every evening since her mother died, he comes strolling up the narrow, stony path that leads from the mainland out onto the craggy jut of ancient pillow lava and red chert, limestone and shifting sand that is only an island at high tide. He comes in fair weather and he comes even if the sky is spitting sleet or snow or rain that stings like needles fired from faerie bows. The girl has never learned his name. He's never volunteered it, and she's never asked. His name has never seemed especially important. He comes all the way out to her mother's whitewashed cottage near the lighthouse, and he brings Abishag food so that she never goes hungry. He sees that she has warm clothes and coal and kerosene for the lanterns. He sees that she has shoes. Once, when she caught a bad chest cold, he brought her medicine and nursed her back to health. Two months ago, on her tenth birthday, he brought her sweets and a small music box made from cherry wood and inlaid with abalone shell. When her mother died, the girl was afraid that there would be well-meaning, prying men and women from Newborough who'd come and take her away from the cottage, who'd see that she was shipped off to an orphanage. After all, she had become an orphan, hadn't she? But the dark man told her she'd need never again worry about being forced to leave the cottage where she was born, the house her grandfather had built for her grandmother, before they'd both gone down to the sea, and the only home the girl has ever known. The dark man told her that he'd taken care of everything, every last detail, so she was free to remain on the island as long as she wished.

“Are you my father?” she asked him, that first night he came to her. After all, the girl had never known her father, so, for all she knew, perhaps the dark man was him.

He laughed, but not unkindly, and told her no, that he wasn’t her father, but that he had *met* her father years before, in Korea, during the war. “He asked me to look after you, once your mother was gone,” the dark man said.

“He knew that she would die?” asked the girl.

“Everyone dies,” the dark man had replied.

On his second visit to the cottage, he brought her a brand-new transistor radio, so there was news and soap operas and music, if the weather wasn’t too bad. The first song she heard on the radio was “American Pie” by Don McLean, and she has never heard a song that she’s liked better.

Sometimes the dark man brings her books.

And sometimes he reads to her, and other nights he tells her stories that are all his own and no one else’s. The dark man knows many stories.

Some nights, like tonight, they sit together at the fire and listen to the sea shattering itself against the rocky shore, the ravenous Atlantic patiently eating away at the island, one grain at a time. To the girl, it has always seemed that the breakers are interwoven with murmuring voices, if only one knows how to hear them.

“What are the waves whispering tonight?” the dark man asks her, because (as he’s told the girl) he does not himself know the language of the sea. He was born in the Egyptian desert, hundreds of miles from the ocean, and he only knows the languages of sand dunes and scorpions, of serpents and of men.

“‘Come away,’” she says. “They are saying, ‘Come away. Come away with me.’”

The dark man has just finished the last of the laverbread and steamed cockles that she cooked for their dinner, and he lights his pipe and sits back in his chair and watches her for a few minutes before he says anything more.

“Someday,” he tells her, finally, “when you’ve done everything here you were born to do. Just take care not to let the sirens have

their way with you before then. Take care not to end up like your poor mother."

The first night he came to the cottage near Tŵr Mawr lighthouse, the dark man already knew everything about how her mother had died, how late one morning she'd gone alone to the beach below the cottage, taken off all her clothes, and swum out as far as she could before the cold and exhaustion had claimed her. Before the *sea* had claimed her. He knew that the girl had watched it all from the doorway of the cottage. He knew that the she'd *seen* her mother drown. He also knew that the body had never been recovered, and he knew that the girl had gone to the beach and waited for her mother to return, that she'd waited until sunset, and then she'd gathered up her mother's clothing and gone back to the whitewashed cottage. He knew that the clothes were kept locked away inside a cedar chest at the foot of the girl's bed. And he knew that, from time to time, the drowned woman rose to whisper terrible secrets to her daughter and to tell her about the cities that sprawled in the deep places and about the beings who'd built them, aeons before the coming of man. Some nights, the girl could be persuaded to share those secrets, but not always, even though her mother had assured her time and again that the dark man was a friend and could be trusted and would never betray her.

"I don't intend to drown myself," says the girl.

"I know," the dark man replies. "But few ever do. Usually, it's the last thing on a person's mind, drowning."

"It wasn't the last thing on my mother's mind," she says.

And he replies, "No, but your mother was weak, and she despaired. It wasn't her time, and she knew it. She wasn't finished here. She hadn't taught you all the things your father had trusted her to teach you."

"Which is why you're here?" she asks.

"Which is why I'm here," he replies. "That, and also because I wouldn't see you starved or worse."

She asks him, "What would be worse than starving?"

And he answers, "Many things, child. More things than I could ever count. But worst of all for you, that you might be stolen away to

some place far from the sea, where neither your mother nor your grandparents could ever find you again."

"My grandparents have never visited me," she reminds him. "Because of what my mother did."

"All the same," he says. "It would be worse than starving." And then he blows grey smoke rings towards the low rafters of the whitewashed cottage. He's stopped watching her and is staring instead into the small, fragrant peat fire crackling in the hearth. There are nights when the dark man sees visions in the flames, and the girl suspects this is because he was born in a desert, where the sun burns everything dry and brittle and black. Her mother—who'd been born by the ocean—saw visions in water, so to the girl it seems a reasonable enough explanation for why the fire in her hearth talks to the dark man.

"I suppose that it would be," she tells him. "Worse than starving, I mean."

"You can count on that," he says.

The girl is quiet for a while then, watching the dark man watching the fire and smoking his pipe. Tonight his smoke smells of oranges and cinnamon. She's only ever tasted an orange once, when he brought her one as a gift on the night of the summer solstice, wrapped up in a swatch of gingham and tied with a red-and-green silk bow. She kept the bow and sometimes she uses it to tie back her long hair.

"Does it mean that she didn't care for me?" she asks him, when almost five full minutes have come and gone with nothing but silence and the crackle of the fire and the sigh of the wind about the eaves of the cottage. "That she went to the sea like that?"

"I can't answer that," he tells her. "But if she didn't, she was a fool. Did she never say that she loved you?"

"No," says the girl, though she wonders if that's the truth or only the way it has come to seem in the time since she was left alone. "She was always good to me, though. She was never cruel."

"It wasn't cruel to leave you, the way that she did?"

"Maybe she knew that you would come, that my father would send you to keep me safe, to keep me from starving."

"No, she didn't know that."

"Then maybe she thought my father would come for me himself."

The dark man shakes his head, and he tells the girl, "No, she knew that your father had dealings elsewhere, business that left him with no time to look after a daughter, even if he'd had the inclination."

"Oh," says the girl and stares down at her plate and the bits of food there, waiting to be scraped and scrubbed away. She picks at a crust of laverbread.

"Regardless, it's nothing you should fret over now," says the dark man. "Your mother is gone. She made her choice. You are here, with me, and you have many choices remaining, none of which concern your mother."

"Please tell me a story, before you go," says the girl, regretting that she asked the dark man such a childish question, knowing how it had been a mistake to let on that she dwells overly on whether or not a drowned woman ever loved her. "Tell me again about Mother Hydra and Father Kraken. Or about Dagon and the Sargasso Sea."

"Not tonight," he says. "Indeed, I think possibly the time for stories has passed." And then the dark man stops smoking his pipe and taps the ashes out onto the hearthstones at his feet. The girl is about to ask him what he means, that the time for stories has passed, when he says, "I'm going to show you something now. Maybe I should have shown you a long time ago, but I was afraid that you weren't yet ready. Maybe you're not ready even now, but I don't dare put it off any longer. Not if the sea is already trying so hard to lure you away."

The girl begins to ask him what it is that he's going to show her, what it is that he's afraid she's not old enough to see. But then she stops and reminds herself to be patient. Whatever it is, she'll know soon enough. Her mother was impatient, and all it got her was drowned.

The dark man has put away his pipe and he's no longer gazing into the fire. He gets up, walks around the table and the dirty dishes and remains of their supper, and then stands looking down at the girl. Her eyes are the blue-green of shallow saltwater on a freezing

day. Her hair is the color of bone char. The dark man reaches out and presses the tip of his left index finger firmly against the flesh between her brows. She sits looking up at him. She isn't frightened. He's never given her any reason not to trust him. He smiles a tired sort of smile, and she smiles back.

"All your life," he says, "you've been waiting for this revelation to find you, though you didn't know it ever finally would. All your short life, you have sensed there was so very much more to the world than you could see, and you feared that you would grow old and die with all those great mysteries still hidden from your view. You have even begun to believe you're not *meant* to know them, not beyond the measly shreds and rumors your drowned mother whispers in your dreams and when you are no more than half awake. Close your eyes now, and I'll show you everything."

The girl nods once, then shuts her eyes.

And the dark man shows he's as good as his promise.

Long hours later, when the sun is up and she opens her eyes again, Abishag sees the gift that he has left for her on the mantel, the figure carved from a lump of green stone. Stone almost the same color as her eyes.

And there will be *another* gift.

In nine months, the girl in the whitewashed cottage by the sea will give birth to a daughter, and the child will have her mother's black hair. But her eyes will be the star-specked midnight eyes of the dark man and her skin will be the color of fog.

9.: Rime of the Super-Sargasso Sea

(October 2017–January 2018)

Two hundred feet beneath the Erastus Corning Tower, in the sprawling labyrinth of fluorescent lights, subway tile, and narrow, winding corridors, there's a cheery sunflower-yellow door marked FORT FATE. Rest assured, the joke isn't lost on the studious men and women who comprise the agency's Directorate of Information Retention and Disposal (DIRD), those unlucky few to whom every damned thing is laid bare. And like the man said, by *damned,* I mean the excluded. That which it's best goes unnoticed and unknown by as few souls as possible, those rude, unruly truths which have no fit place in any decent, polite, and sane understanding of the cosmos. And I say *unlucky few,* because, turns out, any given human being can only endure just so many worldview-shattering, paradigm-shifting revelations before their sanity starts to fray like a cheap pair of socks. The human psyche might well be resilient, but even Superman has to worry about kryptonite. So, employee turnover in the ranks of the DIRD is high and the retirement benefits include, more often than not, padded cells and Thorazine. Want to look past the cover-ups, doublespeak, and obscurantism to find out what *really* happened at Roswell, New Mexico, on June 14, 1947, or learn the truth about Lee Harvey Oswald, the Philadelphia Experiment, and the Tunguska Explosion? Ever wondered what Bigfoot and Nessie eat for breakfast? If maybe the Pope shits in the woods? Then you've come to the right place. The folks at the DIRD, sequestered there behind that cheerful yellow door, they have you covered, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 damn days a year, a multitude of antique typewriters clack-clack-clacking their verboten tarantella.

But we digress.

On the eve of the Signalman's reluctant departure for Los Angeles, he received a thick brown Kraft booklet envelope, 9×12.5, straight flap, button string tie, hand delivered by a junior DIRD correlation specialist who'd worked overtime preparing the report stuffed inside and meant, in due course, for a "former" and soon-to-be reluctantly reactivated agent named Ellison Joanne Nicodemo.

By the way, the unofficial motto of the DIRD is *Noli nuntium necare*.

Don't kill the messenger, natch.

The report reads like the first act of the next J. J. Abrams Cloverfield flick, like a prospectus for an especially preposterous apocalypse. The contents would have made even Charles Hoy Fort blanch. Fish from a clear blue sky, you say? Why, that's nothing. Pshaw, even. We got a goddamn sixty-five-foot sperm whale—Moby-Dick's own great-great-grandkid—stretched across the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

Oh, but wait, you've heard that one already, haven't you?

Fine. Never mind the whale. There's plenty more where that came from.

For example, a string of vicious attacks on swimmers from the eastern Gulf of Mexico all the way up the Atlantic Seaboard to Cape Cod, twenty-two fatalities in all, twice as many more maimed, and not a single one of these the result of sharks—or any of the other usual suspects. Rather, the attackers were swarms of lysianassid amphipods, or "sea fleas," tiny crustaceans each less than one millimeter in length. In every case, the victims died of massive blood loss and tissue damage before they could receive medical attention. The autopsy of a teenage girl killed at Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, recovered more than two thousand feeding amphipods from her body, including many that had burrowed deeply into internal organs.

Yeah, you might want to put down the popcorn now. I'm afraid it really isn't going to get any prettier.

On the morning of October 30, a woman in Kittery, Maine, gave birth to a live foot-long squid, which a biologist from the state department of marine resources later identified as a young specimen of *Idioteuthis cordiformis,* or whip-lash squid, a species native to the

tropical waters of the west Pacific Ocean. The unfortunate mother died during the delivery, but the bouncing baby squid survived for several days.

See what I mean about the popcorn?

One week later, the aforementioned sperm whale.

Three days after that, on the evening of Friday, November 9, schizophrenic patients at a half dozen New England psychiatric hospitals hallucinated that they were drowning, or *being* drowned, by some unseen force that held them beneath cold pools of stagnant black water. Eight of those affected would attempt suicide before month's end, and two would succeed. A similar incident occurred on Thanksgiving Day at Butler Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island, where violent hallucinations were accompanied by the conviction that all humanity would soon perish in a global deluge, the likes of which would put poor Mr. Noah's frog-strangler to shame. *This* time, or so the attending psychologists were advised, there would be no ark and no pretty rainbows and definitely no covenants with a loving god.

Four days later, a Seattle man murdered his wife and two children in what newspapers would later describe as an act of "ritual homicide" and even "human sacrifice." After their throats had been cut ear to ear and their eyes removed, the victims were disemboweled and their bodies stuffed with table salt, driftwood, and an assortment of frozen seafood. Then the killer blew his brains out with a Browning A5 semi-automatic shotgun, but not before he'd used his dead wife's blood to scrawl ALMS FOR MOTHER HYDRA on the living-room wall in letters so tall they reached from floor to ceiling.

Over the next week there were essentially identical incidents in Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Baltimore. The total death toll was fifteen.

And in Baja, Mexico, thousands of stinging jellyfish fell from a cloudless sky for over an hour.

In Sydney, Australia, it was a species of basket starfish, *Gorgonocephalus arcticus*.

In Moscow, there was a brief and messy shower of deepwater sea cucumbers, usually seen only on silty abyssal plains, thousands of feet down.

Chicago got a somewhat more mundane fall of shrimp and hermit crabs.

Tiddely-pom.

On the night of December 2, in Pierre, South Dakota, seventeen people drowned in their sleep, their lungs filled almost to bursting with seawater, and never mind that the nearest available patch of ocean—Hudson Bay—is inconsiderately located more than nine hundred miles away. This time, agents from Albany intervened before civilian authorities were able to perform autopsies and all reporters got was an admittedly thin cover story about an outbreak of viral pneumonia.

Not quite a week later, something enormous—or several smaller somethings—slithered out of icy Lake Erie just after midnight and demolished a power plant at Avon Lake, Ohio. Once again, our friends from beneath the Erastus Corning Tower were among the first responders and dutifully saw to it that all that careless talk of sea monsters and the like was quashed before it reached the press.

Over several nights in December, fishing boats off the northern coast of Wales, especially in the vicinity of Anglesey, reported strange lights in the sky *and* in the water. At dawn on the 17th, both Tŵr Bach and Tŵr Mawr lighthouses on Ynys Llanddwyn exploded and their smoldering ruins tumbled into the Irish Sea.

At precisely 9:23 p.m. UTC on Friday, December 21, at the exact moment of the winter solstice, in excess of twenty-five thousand Twitter accounts simultaneously posted the following passage from Lewis Carroll's 1865 poem, "The Lobster Quadrille" (alternately known as "The Mock Turtle's Song"): *Then turn not pale, beloved snail, but come and join the dance./Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?/Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, won't you join the dance?* Twelve minutes later, those very same accounts posted the closing lines of Tennyson's 1830 sonnet "The Kraken": *There hath he lain for ages, and will lie/Battening upon huge seaworms in his sleep,/Until the latter fire*

shall heat the deep;/Then once by man and angels to be seen,/In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die. Early the next day, Twitter blamed the anomalous tweets on Chinese or Islamic State hackers, which seemed a reasonable enough explanation to pretty much everyone, save the usual gang of conspiracy theorists and anti-vaxxer, flat-earther, Michelle-Obama-is-actually-an-alien-lizard-man crackpots.

That same day, seventeen women and five men joined hands and walked, fully clothed, into the Gulf of Mexico at Vanderbilt Beach, near Naples, Florida. There were several witnesses to the mass drowning, including a camera crew from the local CBS affiliate that had gotten an anonymous heads-up via email. Twenty-two people went into the water, but recovery efforts would fail to turn up even a single corpse. Several of the drowned left behind suicide notes, all of which found their way into the attentive hands of the agents of Dreamland before any inconvenient red flags were raised by lunatic ramblings about eternal life and never-ending bliss in the loving arms of Dagon. Not much could be done about the camera crew, which had been broadcasting live.

On December 22 and 23, there was a veritable frenzy of reports describing grotesque, fish-like humanoids with glowing red-gold eyes seen lurking along beaches and roads bordering salt marshes all the way from Gloucester, Massachusetts, north to Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia. Albany decided to let the media have their fun with this one. There are, regrettably, only so many fingers available to plug leaking dikes at any given time, agency resources being considerably less than infinite. And, anyway, the visiting fishmen left behind no especially incriminating physical evidence, save a few sets of muddy footprints and one blurry photo. The overworked folks in the DIRD found a measure of much needed levity in headlines about the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

The *real* show came on Christmas Eve.

Late on the morning of December 24, the Indian Navy's marine acoustic research ship INS *Sagardhwani,* while conducting a meteorological survey in the South Pacific, reported the sudden appearance of an uncharted landmass very near the oceanic pole of

inaccessibility (48˚52.6'S 123˚23.6'W). Before a decision could be made whether or not to investigate further, the landmass abruptly vanished. The sixteen scientists onboard wrote the experience off as an especially convincing instance of a Fata Morgana mirage. However, approximately two hours after the mirage disappeared, minor tsunamis struck each of the three points of dry land nearest to the location of the *Sagardhwani*'s phantom shoreline—Ducie Atoll in the Pitcairn Islands; Maher Island, off the coast of Marie Byrd Land, Antarctica; and Motu Nui, south of Easter Island. Seismic stations failed to register any earthquake activity that would have accounted for the tsunamis.

In a maternity ward in Galveston, Texas, there was a second improbable birth, when doctors delivered a full-grown pelican eel, also known as the umbrella-mouth gulper, a fish more usually at more home in the deep sea than in Texan uteri. It was stillborn, but the mother lived. The belly of the eel was found to contain an assortment of small shrimp and squids and a fist-sized lump of carved greenish stone. Imagine if maybe the Buddha had been designed by H. R. Giger, or so says the relevant DIRD report.

More mass drownings. More murders in the name of this Mother Hydra character.

Hallelujah, Hosanna, blah, blah, blah.

One of China Eastern Airlines' Boeing 737-800s, en route to Los Angeles International, flew through a school of hammerhead sharks at an altitude of 39,000 feet.

But wait . . . there's more!

There's still the motherfucking *pièce de résistance.*

We take you now to Gove City, Kansas, population less than a hundred men, women, and children, not one of whom would live to see Christmas Day 2017. After a frigid, snowy night, the mercury began to climb right about sunrise and by noon on December 24th the temperature had reached a blistering 98˚F. An hour later, the National Weather Service Forecast Office in Wichita reported the sudden development of a supercell thunderstorm directly over Gove City, a writhing, psychedelic blob of red and magenta dancing across their doppler screens. A tornado warning was duly issued. Aircraft

were warned to steer clear. And then, *within a matter of seconds,* all evidence of the storm disappeared from the radar. Abracadabra and so on and so forth. *Hey, Rocky! Watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat.* Attempts by the NWS to reach the sheriff's office in Gove proved futile, and search and rescue teams were dispatched to the area. But once again Albany intervened, and the Signalman and Mackenzie Regan got there first. With the aid of Army and National Guard troops, a fifty-square-mile area around the town was cordoned off, no one in, no one out, and the CDC obligingly coughed up a federal order for isolation and quarantine. The FAA was just as cooperative in declaring the entire county prohibited airspace. So, hush-hush, because loose lips sink fragile human perceptions of order and chaos, of time and space.

"What's down there, man, you're not going to fucking believe it."

"Dragons. I saw dragons."

Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs . . .

"I shit you not, I saw goddamn dinosaurs."

A week later, with the cleanup and cover-up behind him, with Gove City a bulldozed, napalmed, salt-sown wasteland, the Signalman would struggle to describe the scene that greeted him and Agent Regan when their Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk set down on what once had been Broad Street. Every building, every utility pole and cottonwood tree, absolutely *everything* over a foot or two high had been leveled. Automobiles looked a lot more like crushed soda cans. And water, water everywhere, rivulets and streams and great pools of *saltwater* were laid out beneath the vast, pale sky of the Kansas prairie. There were rubbery mountains of kelp and an impossible assemblage of dead or dying reptilian monsters and long-extinct fishes and the whorled shells and tentacles of giant ammonites stolen from a Late Cretaceous epicontinental seaway, dry and gone some eighty-five million years, and unceremoniously dumped across Gove City.

"When I was a boy," said the Signalman, "we had this big ol' coffee-table sorta book, *The World We Live In,* published by *Life* magazine back in the fifties. In that book, there was a painting, a double-page spread depicting all the sorts of weird shit that lived in

the sea back in the Mesozoic, during the dinosaur days. The painting was done by a guy named Rudolph Zallinger, same fellow painted the murals for the Peabody Museum down at Yale. The ones that won the Pulitzer. You want to know what we found in Gove? Yeah? Well, you just google that painting. You'll see for yourself."

Of course, Albany didn't need to google anything. They had video, and they had a couple hundred specimens freeze dried or pickled in formalin, and they also had the death of an agent who'd gotten sloppy and been devoured by a thirty-foot plesiosaur that had lunged out of the flooded basement of the Gove County Courthouse.

And they had a soapstone idol that had been found in the wreckage.

Giger's Buddha, remember?

And there's plenty more, sure, plenty more horrors between Christmas Eve and the January morning when Ellison Nicodemo opened her eyes to find the Signalman sitting there in her apartment, staring forlornly at a broken television. But after a certain point, even horror becomes tedium. Or, at best, low burlesque. By now, you either get the picture or you never, ever shall. Them's the breaks.

A procession of the damned.

But just *one more item* in this *Grand Guignol,* though. A phone call to Albany, to the Signalman's office there below all that steel and Vermont Pearl marble, all those tons of concrete and glass pressing down like God's own paperweight to hide a billion dirty secrets. Just one more damned thing, then we're done. A woman's voice, a voice he'd only heard once before and had prayed he'd never have to hear again, except in those nightmares all the whisky in the world wouldn't banish.

"Nicodemo should have killed me," the woman told him. She had a Welsh accent and her voice made the Signalman think of holding a seashell up to his ear. "But you already *know* that, don't you? You know how you should have found yourself a better assassin. It's too late now. Now they're coming, the Mother and the Father. Now they're almost here. She should have killed me when she had the chance."

And while he was sitting there trying to think what to say, she hung up.

And so it goes, as Mr. Vonnegut used to be fond of saying.

And so it goes.

10.: Monday Evening Kaiju Genderfuck Pas de Deux

(Atlanta, January 10, 2011)

"They sent you here to kill me," whispers the siren, the coiling and uncoiling collage of silt and shadow pressing down upon you, crushing and pinning you to the hotel bed. She's bleeding, but you can't remember why. Her lips are pressed to your left ear with a fearful intimacy, and her breath is the breath of a salt marsh and her wrath is the still quiet before a hurricane makes landfall. "They sent you here with your pet to *murder* me. They baited a hook, and I bit like a starving mackerel. They sent *you* here, because they were afraid to come for me themselves." And how you have *tried* shutting your eyes. How you have tried so very, very hard. And how you've tried all the fancy mental defenses and psychological gymnastics that came with your training—dissociative virtual relocation, concentrative self-hypnosis, think-aloud initiated autogenic-neurofeedback *et alia*. Grasping at straws, you have trotted out that bag of tricks, all to no avail. You are alone with her in this dingy room off Ponce de Leon Avenue, this room that stinks of disinfectant and mold and tiny bars of soap—and of *her,* because she is fast eclipsing everything in the world that is *not* her. Bending low above you, she is plucking all the cosmos asunder and remaking it to suit her secret needs and the secret needs of the powers she serves. *Where is the hound?* you think, and then you say the words aloud, "Where is the hound?" But your voice has been diminished by the sheer undeniable weight of her, collapsed like a Styrofoam coffee cup sunk fifteen hundred meters down, like the moment of a submarine's implosion. "Yes," the siren hisses through needle teeth and baleen, "where *is* the hound? Shouldn't I already be dead by now? Shouldn't

I be over and done with by now? Wasn't that the plan? Well, I *know* the day I die, and this isn't it." Helpless to do otherwise, you stare straight into her bottomless eyes, and she smiles and stares back into you, finding you hardly even deep as a handful of piss. *It isn't coming,* she tells you, this time without even moving her lips. She is the ocean's ventriloquist, and you are, at best, a skillfully carved driftwood marionette. *If it were coming, it would be here by now. If it were coming, you wouldn't be in this fix, this mess you're in. And when they find the dispatch that I'll make of you, Ellison Nicodemo, and when they ask you why you have failed them so completely, you will teach them of the soul cages and the merciless justice of drowned gods.* Now the siren kisses you, and something living that is not a tongue slides across her lips and moves slimy across *your* lips and between your teeth and slithers down your gagging throat. It will make a den of your belly. It will make a burrow of your soul. "But what is it I will I make of *you*?" the siren asks. "What will I fashion from you, little killer, little houndwife, that they will slink away and not ever trouble me again?" The thing she has vomited into your belly snickers to itself and seeps toxins that are the envy of every box jelly and blue-ringed octopus, every lionfish and cloth-of-gold cone ever spawned. Without speaking, the siren whispers, *There was a little pool, curved in a smooth arc, dear to Scylla for its peacefulness. This, the goddess tainted in advance and contaminated with her monstrous poison. She sprinkled the liquid squeezed from harmful creatures, and muttered a mysterious incantation, dark with strange words, thrice nine times, in magical utterance.* And where a moment ago there was a bed in a seedy room in a tawdry hotel in a crowded night-bound Southern city, there is now only a weathered slab of jasper and pillow lava beneath your naked body. Where there was the noise of traffic and hip-hop blaring from the room next door, now there is the sea slamming itself against the breakers, and jaundiced streetlight through the window has become the ivory moon gazing down from a peephole punched in the salt-dabbed sky. *My own grandmother was bedded on this altar stone,* the siren whispers. *And my mother. It wasn't meant for unconsecrated filth like you.* And again you think, *Where is the*

hound? Why won't it come? And again the poisonous thing in your gut, Circe's thrice nine times, snickers to itself and pricks at your mind. *But I could make you something better,* says the siren, and another wave slams the rocks and showers you in freezing spray. *Cell by cell, molecule by molecule, I could undo this crude terrestrial evolution. I could unzip all those inconvenient double helices and remind you where you came from. Then you would be* my *assassin, little killer. Then you would be* my *hound.* A moment ago, your hands were clutching frantically at damp sheets, sheets *she* had *you* soak with water from the tub, but now your fingers scrabble at unyielding igneous stone as you play Andromeda to her Cetus. *You may not have been born worthy, but you can be made worthy.* You hear yourself say, "Just let me close my eyes, please just let me close my eyes," and the siren shakes her head and kisses you again, and there's the taste of kelp and oysters and low-tide estuary mud. *Scylla comes, wading waist deep into the pool, only to find the water around her groin erupt with yelping monsters,* and *Maybe,* says the siren, *when I'm done, they'll keep you in a great glass aquarium tank below that watchtower of theirs and show you off as a warning and feed you on fresh alewives and blueback herring. Maybe they'll even teach you tricks.* You're scraping your fingers raw against her altar, your blood mingling with the roaring, hungry sea. *Please, just let me close my eyes, but before you have even finished speaking, all the waves resounded, and a monster menaced them, rising from the deep sea, and covered the wide waters with its breadth.* The thing in your belly has become an ouroboros, infinitely recursive, a pregnant Möbius strip, the strangest of all strange loops cycling you back upon yourself, and the scabby Welsh seashore comes apart, just as the hotel room came apart.

"Where are you *now,* little killer?" the siren wants to know, as if she needs to ask. "Tell me what you see."

And where, indeed, but a dark place, and it is a darkness unlike any you have ever known before, unlike any you have even managed to halfway imagine, waking or asleep or anywhere in between. This is a *solid* darkness possessed somehow of form and substance, and you can *feel* it, palpable, crowding in all around. You think how you

might easily reach out and grab a whole fistful, if you had the courage. If you were that careless. It feels *eager,* the dark; it feels *impatient*. And crouching helpless and afraid you think how you must have wandered alone in this lightless, echoing place for days upon days, weeks upon weeks, retreating across some vast plain of polished stone, coming finally to a corner—or something that only *seems* vaguely *like* a corner if you don't allow yourself to think on it too hard. If you pause to consider its screwball, cockeyed geometry, it doesn't seem anything at all like a corner, but more like a curve than the meeting point of convergent lines. *If it were only a corner,* you think, *the hound could find me here and slay the dragon and take me home again*. You hug yourself and shiver, naked and slick with brine and diatomaceous ooze and clinging strands of seaweed, with the siren's gift growing fat in your belly. You know that somehow you've become lost *beyond* lost within some impossibly cavernous space beneath the bottom of the sea, without knowing *how* you know this. You are lost, and the hound isn't coming, and Albany isn't coming, and the Signalman isn't coming. But worse and *worst,* you are not alone, after all. Something here is stirring. And all at once you remember how you know *exactly* what that something is, because the siren whispered its awful name into your ear and into your mouth and brain, and the thing that wears that name is infinitely *worse* than the smothering darkness, which is, in truth, only here to keep this god-thing hidden, and to keep it company and to mutter worshipful obscenities to flatter a sleeping leviathan. What an utterly insufficient word—*leviathan*. The serpent of Job and Isaiah is hardly even the palest poor phantom beside this titan that has slept away untold eons, shrouded by the endless, impenetrable night here at the bottom of the deepest part of the sea. A million years ago or more, the siren whispered and set you wandering the lightless hallways of a sprawling, sunken necropolis so that you came suddenly upon the Sleeper in His abyssal vault, and even through the living blackness you *saw* Him. And beholding Him, you fell to your hands and knees and scuttled away to this corner that is no corner, wishing yourself only a pair of ragged, inconsequential claws, smaller even than a mote of dust, so that there would not be even the

slimmest chance that the Sleeper—in His *own* dreams—would ever notice you. *A mountain walked,* the siren whispers, and you never have needed to scream so badly as you do now. But you *won't* scream. You *know* that you won't. You won't make any sound at all. The siren whispers—or *you* think to yourself—*No woman or man has ever been even half so damned as would be the one who wakes Him. Even Judas Iscariot would seem, by comparison, a saint. Hitler would seem a choirboy.* So in the darkness you wait, and the thing in your belly snickers, and great white worms and fish with blind and bulging eyes, creatures that have never seen sunlight, slip about you and wrap you in their icy folds.

And *then*—and *now*—

—it may be the Sleeper was nothing more substantial than a fever dream, because *here* you sit in a chair at the center of a red maze painted upon a wooden floor. The siren is waiting somewhere at your back, and there's a tall looking glass in a rotting wooden frame, standing only a few feet in front of you, holding your reflection captive. And everything here hangs suspended within a shimmering liquid sphere. *Like mercury,* you think, *or oil, or water drawn up from the bottom of the sea.* It's perfectly smooth, that sphere, so now you know why the hound hasn't come. It can't *come* because there are no admitting *angles* for it to slip through, not here within the siren's hollow sphere. You take a deep breath, because your chest aches, as if you haven't breathed in ages, and the air reeks of dead fish and sulfurous hydrothermal fissures, of encrusting salt rimes and blood. In your belly, the siren's child wriggles, wanting to be born, and you can feel its mother searching through your thoughts, thumbing memories like sodden pages. You look down at your muddy feet, at the webbing that has grown between your toes, at the scatter of iridescent photophores glowing blue-green beneath your skin, and you ask the siren what she thinks she'll find, what it is she's seeking. You tell her you're not trying to hide anything, not anymore. You make promises and swear that all your consciousness and unconsciousness is an open and willing book. "I'm not keeping anything back from you," you whisper desperately and hear yourself sobbing, and you hate that sound, as you have always hated the

sound of crying. The siren roughly brushes fragile recollections, and they burst in your mind like bubbles rising from deep, deep places. Days and nights come and gone—

"She got mixed up with an Austrian group, Black Sun. They use heroin to fund . . . fuck, I don't know what all. Expeditions to find the Aryan descendants of Atlantis. Also, I think you broke my jaw. I'm going to have to explain this to my handler, you know."

"Rough sex explains a lot, Elle. Especially at some crappy, Johann-come-lately Thule sex party . . ."

"Can I at least get up off the floor now?"

"I'm not keeping you on the fucking floor. Get up if you want to. Just tell me, how much shit is Dieter bringing you tonight?"

"Listen, if you're going to take those briefcases, you can't leave me conscious. It has to look like I didn't just give them up."

"In my opinion, I'd have to leave you dead. Anyway, we've got dope contacts, if I wanted the dope."

—and the siren, she smirks, and the thing inside your belly snickers, and you realize that the red maze shifts and rearranges itself every time you look away. There's no path out, unless she says so. Picking at the convolutions of your frontal lobe and prefrontal cortex, the siren's claws are as good as razor blades. *This isn't necessary,* you tell her. "I fucking swear to you, I'm not holding anything back." But the siren, she laughs her typhoon laugh and tugs hard at the supramarginal gyrus of your left parietal lobe. *We'll be finished soon enough,* she says, *and when I have what I need, little killer,* then *we'll play dress up and you can be the pretty princess and I can be the hagfish with a poison apple, luring you away to nap inside your glass whale-fall coffin.* She leans in and laps the tears from your face, and another mnemonic bubble bursts—

. . . The car races through the stormy night, the Signalman hunched behind the wheel. Ellison Nicodemo skims over the clutter of redacted documents until she finds the mug shot of a woman she has to kill tonight.

"Her name's Kristall Weber," says the Signalman, "a former double agent for the BND and GRU with ties to X. Not a very nice woman, when all is said and done. True to form, she decided to

double-cross us. Which is what I get for trusting the Greek. Anyway, I can't tell you exactly what all she had her grubby fingers in—mostly because our friend hasn't told me—but what I do *know is that we've got a very fucking small window available to tidy everything up before she defects to Julia Set and makes it out of the States. Best guess, she's headed for a helicopter extraction. We had eyes on her until about twenty minutes ago, and then our spotter went and . . . well. Shit happens, right?"*

Ellison commits Kristall Weber's face to memory. Then she switches off the iPad and slides it beneath the car seat. She ruffles the brunette wig she's wearing with her fingers, sending up a spray of rain droplets that spatter both the Signalman and the windshield.

"Goddamn rain," she says, drawing the 9mm from somewhere inside her coat, giving it a quick once-over, popping out the clip, jamming it right back in. "Three businessmen from Turkey are going to be very fucking unhappy if I'm late. I just need you to understand the consequences of that, okay? These aren't men who are accustomed to being left at the altar."

She pulls back on the slide, putting one in the chamber.

"Mags in the glove box, hardware in the trunk," the Signalman tells her. "Listen, I didn't even want to put you in play for this. But we don't have a lot of deniable resources in striking distance. Weber has business in retro-engineered Zeta-Reticulan tech and backside exo-trafficking, so we're going to spin the hit as a preemptive decap strike. The competition getting aggressive, throwing its weight around." The Signalman looks at her as they race down an entrance ramp onto the Massachusetts Turnpike. "Can you do this, kiddo?"

Ellison opens the glove compartment, takes out the spare clips and puts them into the pockets of her raincoat, then slams it shut again. "Yeah," she says, "I can do this. But first, I need you *to be absolutely clear about the . . ."*

—the siren has told you to walk, and so you're walking, putting one foot in front of the other, following the endlessly shifting warp and weft of the maze painted on the floor, careful to avoid dead ends and switchbacks. Your aching skull, so filled with her fingertips, feels as if it's about to burst open at the seams, but you know that's *not*

going to happen. There's no easy way out, not now, not here. *And don't look at your feet,* the siren sneers. *Look at the mirror. Keep your eyes on the mirror, little killer. That's where all the action is. Or soon enough will be.* And, because there's no fight left in you, you do as she says and look up. The mirror's still right there, but now, instead of your reflection, it's become a window into what appears to be a dilapidated building of some sort, bare concrete floors, cement columns, exposed ductwork and tattered fiberglass insulation and everything lit by stark fluorescent tubes hanging on chains from the ceiling. There's something else hung there, too, and at first—even after all you've seen, after all she has *shown* you—you think your eyes are playing tricks on you. *No, dear, not this time. No sleight of hand. No subterfuge. What you see is what you get.* And what you see through the looking-glass window is an enormous shark, gutted and hanging snout down from the rafters of that deserted, derelict place. *Soon,* whispers the siren, and she's put something in your right hand, something small and hard that you don't dare take your eyes off the mirror to see. *Soon enough we'll be done here. Your carriage awaits.* And, at that, the thing in your belly rolls over and over and over, slouching towards whatever Bethlehem is its birthright. The siren sighs, the tempest's sigh, the bone's wrangle, and a talon digs deeper into soft grey matter—

"Which is easier to believe?" Ellison asks the Signalman. "That this Nell Snow woman is a face-stealing ghoul-human hybrid, or that she's only a sleeper agent constructed for . . . well, whatever it is Barbican Estate might find useful?"

The Signalman waits until the thoroughly confused waitress is well out of earshot before answering. He unfolds two paper napkins and covers his lap. They're new slacks, after all. "In more normal circumstances," he says, "I could see how maybe that question would have a pretty obvious answer. But, unfortunately, as the fucking fates would have it, our particular theater of operations doesn't usually afford obvious answers or clear-cut delineations between that which is impossible and that which is merely improbable. Which is to say, I don't really I have an answer, only probabilities." The Signalman sprinkles salt and pepper on his

scrambled eggs, a dash of Tabasco, and then he spreads margarine over his blueberry pancakes. "Sure, a sleeper agent would be reasonable in a more conventional counterintelligence, deep-cover scenario, someone as invisible as invisible ever gets. A goddamn null set of a human being." He pauses and looks at Ellison across his breakfast. "To paraphrase a wonderful Walter Matthau movie, double agents have to be drab and unremarkable people."

Ellison frowns and stares down at her own breakfast. The eggs are overcooked.

"And Immacolata Sexton—and that Ptolema character," she says. "We're actually meant to believe they're—"

"Eat up, kiddo," says the Signalman. "I'm tired of talking about Barbican's freakshow. Your food's getting cold. More to the point, my *food's getting cold."*

—and just before you turn that Alice trick and step through the looking glass, you finally hear the hound snuffling about somewhere beyond the confines of the shimmering sphere, angry and cheated and trying to find a way through. So you haven't been abandoned. You've only been locked up somewhere the troublesome laws of spacetime and quantum physics make it impossible for the beast to reach you. The sphere is the siren's medicine for Tindalos, her prophylaxis against her doom. And now the hound does what it does that isn't howling, a cry like entire planets grinding one against the other, and for just an instant, your head is clear again. For the first time since the siren took the shiny lure and showed up at the High Museum, joining you in front of the glass case and the hideous little artifact on display *inside* the case—just like the Signalman had said she would, just like all the DIRD data crunchers beneath the Erastus Corning Tower had predicted. The trap had been the Signalman's idea, and it had worked like a fucking charm.

The hound wails, and there is clarity.

And within this clarity you close your eyes.

The label in the display case claims the idol came from marine dredgings off the coast of Prince of Wales Island. That it turned up in 1937, during a canal expansion for a ferry, hauled up by the crew of the *Sweet Leilani,* a week before the ship sank into the frigid depths

of Cross Sound. There were no survivors, says the label. This siren, the Welsh-born woman named Jehosheba, she takes your hand, and hers is wet and cold as ice. “Alms,” she says, “Alms for Mother Hydra. Alms for the Abyss.”

The sharpshooters open fire. The hound wails.

She squeezes your hand.

And that should be that, between the hound and the guns, the two or three bullets that found their mark, the red mess spilling from Jehosheba’s gut—except that *isn’t* that. That isn’t that at all, and *now* is *later* and you’ve gone down to her god and walked her maze and with eyes closed you’re stepping through a mirror, out of one nightmare and straight into another. You’re helplessly, frantically wondering why no one’s stopping this, why no one is coming to your rescue, why no one *has your back* like the Signalman promised just the night before. The siren smiles and kindly takes her claws from your skull, either because she has what she wants or because it wasn’t ever there in the first place, and she whispers, “It’s almost over now, little killer.

“It’s almost just begun.

“Hush now.

“You’ve no one to blame except yourself.

“And him.”

11.: Memo to Human Resources (Whistling in the Dark)

(Dreamland, January 19, 2018)

When God created black, this room must have been the reason why. Black was created because, one day, 13.8 billion years down the pike from the instant of the Big Bang, it would be needed for this room to exist. Mackenzie Regan opens her eyes, then shuts them, then opens them again. She's sitting in a black chair at a black table. The walls are black and so are the floors. So is the ceiling, but she's trying not to look directly at the ceiling. There's something wrong with it, something awful. It seems to rotate counterclockwise, and she thinks of Dorothy caught inside the twister, flying away to Oz. Mackenzie looks at everything that isn't the ceiling. She looks down at her thin, pallid hands, if only because they're not black.

She thinks, *This is what an interrogation room would look like if whoever built it had only seen interrogation rooms in old cop shows and gangster movies.*

And if they could only use the color black.

"Am I alive?" she asks, and the achromatic stick figure sitting across the table from her seems to waver for a moment, like heat shimmer rising off scalding asphalt. When it doesn't answer, Mackenzie adds, "Did I die on the plane? Did we all die on the plane?"

"We have a few questions for you," the stick figure replies, and its sexless voice is as black as the room. Compared to the voice of the interrogator, that Siri bitch is just dripping with charisma and sunshine.

"First, I want to know if I'm alive," she says. Mackenzie Regan might be relatively new to the spy vs. spy scene, but she's been

around long enough to know that the agency has ways of making even the dead talk, should the need arise.

The stick figure tilts its featureless stick-figure head to one side, and it crosses its long stick-figure arms. “Rest assured, we will come back to that, Agent Regan. But time is a factor. Time is of the essence. Time is the only thing we do not presently possess in abundance.”

The walls and floor of the black room look like sheets of polished graphite. There are no windows. There’s no door. There’s no visible light source, and there’s nothing that Mackenzie would ever go so far as to call *light,* but somehow she can still see, can distinguish one perfectly black shape from another.

No, not graphite, she thinks. *Graphite isn’t* this *black*. And then she remembers something called *Vantablack,* a man-made substance capable of absorbing 99.96% of all light that touches it. A honeycomb of *vertically aligned carbon nanotube arrays,* VANTA, that traps photons and holds them until they’re finally absorbed and dissipated as heat. At some point, she read a briefing on the potential weapon and camouflage applications of Vantablack, but when *was* that? *Vantablack, trademarked by Surrey NanoSystems Limited, referenced in three patents—*

“It would be helpful, Agent Regan,” says the stick figure in its black voice, “if you would please try harder to focus. We need to talk now about what happened on the flight from Los Angeles to Quonset. Your mind is wandering. We need to talk now about what you saw, what you recall of what you may have experienced before the plane went down.”

“So, we crashed?” she asks, already knowing the answer.

“We need to talk now about the water in the plane.”

And Mackenzie *remembers* the water then, and the terrible cold of the water, and the Signalman cursing while the cabin of the Beechcraft King Air flooded. At least the black room isn’t cold, even if it isn’t actually warm, either.

“Yes,” says the stick figure. “The plane. The flood inside the plane.”

Mackenzie stares back at her faceless inquisitor, and she thinks, *If you can read my mind, why don't you just take whatever it is you're looking for and leave me alone?*

"We are bound by protocol," it replies. "There are rules, regulations, restrictions."

"Is he dead, too?" Mackenzie asks. "Did we both die up there?"

"We'll come to that, by and by," says the stick figure. "But first there are other, more pressing matters. And time is a factor."

"Time is of the essence," Mackenzie whispers to herself.

"Very much so," says the stick figure. "We have questions about Agent Nicodemo, and about the water, and about everything you saw up there. We need to know if you might be aware of Agent Nicodemo's whereabouts, if you know what has become of her. She was still on the plane when it began to flood, yes?"

"Where else would she have been?"

"That's what we need to find out," the stick figure answers unhelpfully.

The blackness is beginning to make Mackenzie's head ache, and she rubs her eyes.

"Do we really have to do this here?" she asks the stick figure. "Isn't there somewhere else? I think this place is beginning to make me ill."

"It will be over soon," the stick figure assures her, "if you'll only answer our questions. Even if you do not, it will be over soon, because we have so very little time."

I can see black light, and *Any customer can have a car painted any color he wants so long as it is black,* and *All the pictures had all been washed in black,* and–

"You need now to focus, please, Agent Regan. Your mind is straying."

No, my mind is smothering.

"Where was the water coming from?" the stick figure wants to know.

"From everywhere," Mackenzie tells it. "It was coming from everywhere all at once. I don't know. It was like the air started bleeding water." She stops rubbing her eyes and goes back to looking

at her hands, pale as chalk or mascarpone, the veins like a roadmap traced in blue and violet ink. They *look* like a dead woman's hands. Or like the hands of a woman deep in a coma, kept alive by machines and the men who keep the machines alive. Either way, the hands of a broken woman.

"Are you saying that it was raining inside the airplane?" the stick figure asks.

"No, it wasn't like rain. It wasn't at all like rain."

"How was it not?" asks the stick figure, and it leans back in its black seat, intently watching without eyes. "How was it not like rain?"

"It wasn't falling," Mackenzie replies. "And it was saltwater. We were going over the report on the Gove situation again, and—"

"And, at this point, where was Agent Nicodemo?"

"In her seat," says Mackenzie.

"She wasn't included in the discussion? Why is that?"

For a moment, Mackenzie silently stares back at the stick figure and at all the blackness behind and around and above it, all that seething, light-devouring void, and she wonders, briefly, what would happen if she at least *tried* not to answer any more of its questions. Ellison Nicodemo might not be the very last thing she wants to talk about, but she isn't far from it. And for the first time it occurs to Mackenzie Regan that it might not be Albany conducting this debriefing. For all she has any way of knowing, it might be someone from Barbican or, much worse yet, the Julia Set crowd.

"Time is a factor," the stick figure reminds her, crossing its arms again.

"No," says Mackenzie. "She wasn't included in the discussion. She was so high I doubt she could have made it to the toilet on her own. That woman shouldn't even have been on the plane," she says. "I told him that, before we picked her up, that the three of us returning on the same flight was an unnecessary risk, but he wouldn't hear it."

"So when the plane began to flood, she was still in her seat?"

"Isn't that what I just told you? Aren't we in a hurry?"

The stick figure sits up straight once more, and with a stick-figure arm it makes a motion like someone smoothing back their hair. It

nods its featureless, round head. “Returning, then, to the water, please describe now, as briefly as possible, and without omitting any salient details, how events unfolded on the aircraft after it began to flood.”

Mackenzie Regan glances up at the ugly gyre where the ceiling should be.

“There were fish in the water,” she says. “Little silver fish, like minnows. I held one in my hand. There were lots of them. Hundreds, maybe.”

When she looks back at the stick figure, there’s that heat shimmer again.

All I want is blackness. Blackness and silence.

Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side, which he never shows anybody.

Darkness is your candle.

Mackenzie shuts her eyes. Or she only imagines that she does, just as it may only be an illusion that she’s sitting at a black table in a black room, being interrogated by a black stick figure. She shuts her eyes and she tells a story about an airplane filling up with seawater high above the Utah desert. She keeps her eyes closed tight, and she *remembers* the tale aloud, because maybe when she’s done they’ll let her wake up or let her finish with dying; either way, surely she’ll be free of the terrible black place.

She talks, and it all comes back in fits and starts, like stuttering frames of an impossibly absurd film she saw a long, long time ago.

The cold water and the little silver fish.

Smoke and sparks and screaming alarms.

And the moment when Ellison Nicodemo disappeared. There one second, gone the next, like a cheap parlor trick.

“You actually saw when she vanished?” asks the stick figure.

“Yeah. I was looking right at her. The water was already knee deep and the plane was pitching forward. We were already losing altitude. She was trying to get her seatbelt fastened. That ought to be funny, don’t you think? It isn’t, but it ought to be.”

The smell of ozone and electrical fires. The poisonous stink of jet fuel.

“Seawater freezes at about twenty-eight degrees Fahrenheit,” she says, because maybe the stick figure doesn’t know these things. Because maybe no one ever bothered to tell it. “At that height, the air outside the plane was, what, fifty below? When the emergency door opened, all that water pouring out into the sky and taking us along, it was like . . . did you see that video online of someone tossing a bowl of hot water into the air, the way it instantly crystallized and fell as snow? Well, *that’s* what I remember—falling through a snowstorm, falling in a blizzard. Ice on my hands and my face and clothes and . . .”

Falling like a rock.

All that ice, no way the chutes would have opened. Even with the automatic activation devices as backup, no way.

Mackenzie opens her eyes again, because that’s the last of it. There’s nothing left to remember, nothing left to tell, and she finds that the stick figure is gone and she’s alone in the black place. And now there’s nothing left to do but wait.

12.: Casey's Last Ride (Cue Ennio Morricone)

(West Hollywood, Whiskey A Go Go, January 16, 2018)

The Signalman takes a sip of his J.T.S. Brown and swishes the bourbon around in his mouth for a moment or two before swallowing. He has a bad tooth that's starting to go hot, and the alcohol dulls the pain a little. That rotten molar is just one more thing he keeps telling himself he'll take care of and just one more thing he can't ever seem to get around to dealing with. There's a framed Johnny Cash poster on the wall, Johnny Cash showing the whole damn world his middle finger, and the Signalman raises his glass in a toast to the Man in Black, then takes another swig of bourbon. Mackenzie Regan is sitting across from him, the two of them sitting together and alone in the horseshoe booth upholstered in cherry-red Naugahyde. She ordered a vodka and cranberry, but she's hardly touched it. Mackenzie's not really one for drinking on the job. She's not really one for drinking off it, either.

It's late on a Tuesday afternoon, and no one's in the club but the two of them and a couple of the staff. A Thin Lizzy cover band is scheduled to go on at eight, and the Signalman keeps checking his silver pocket watch, like eight o'clock isn't several long hours away from now. The Doors' "Strange Days" is playing, and it's almost enough to make him go find whoever's responsible and get them to play something else instead. Slip them a sawbuck to swap out Jim Morrison's apocalyptic crooning for any song a little less grim and a lot less fucking apropos. His life is plenty weird enough without the universe supplying a soundtrack.

"I wish you could have met her eight or nine years ago," he says to Mackenzie, resigning himself to the Doors. The song will be over soon, anyway, and there are better ways to blow ten dollars. "She was good. Most times, she was better than good."

Mackenzie frowns and stirs at her drink with a pink swizzle stick, then glances up at the Signalman. “Well, be that as it may, as far as I can tell all she is now is a junkie and a burnout and a liability. Putting her back into play might be the worst move I’ve ever seen personnel make.”

“Which just shows to go you haven’t been around very long,” says the Signalman. “That’s not to say I think she should be on the street, but there’s nothing left to be gained by belaboring the obvious. And whatever Ellison is now, it doesn’t negate who she was or what she did back then. You read her file.”

“Mostly,” says Mackenzie. “The broad strokes. Enough to get the gist.”

“Is that how we’re judging folks these days, by getting *the gist*?”

Mackenzie doesn’t reply. She just stares into her neglected drink.

“Anyway,” says the Signalman, “since you know the *broad strokes,* you know about that thing in Germany, back in aught nine, the job she did in Babelsberg?”

“Babelsberg? Where’s Babelsberg?”

The Signalman sighs and rubs his temples with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He wants a cigarette so badly that the craving is almost as painful as the occasional jolts from his bum tooth. He thinks again about ignoring the No Smoking signs and reaching for the pack of Camels in his jacket pocket. He’s got a badge, if anyone wants to complain, a badge that says he’s an NSA agent, even if he isn’t anything of the sort. No one at the NSA is going to be complaining, either, and what the fuck good is a phony gold shield if it can’t at least get him a smoke when he needs one.

“Potsdam,” he tells Mackenzie. “I assume you’ve heard of Potsdam.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of Potsdam,” she replies, and he can tell she’s doing her best not to sound annoyed with him. “But I haven’t heard of Babelsberg.” Mackenzie takes a swallow of her vodka and cranberry, then goes back to stirring it with the swizzle stick.

“So, you *didn’t* read about the thing with Ellison in Babelsberg?” he wants to know.

“No,” she tells him, “I guess not. I must have skipped over that part.”

“But you got the gist,” he says.

The Signalman takes out his cigarettes and lays the half-empty pack on the table between them. Mackenzie points to one of the No Smoking signs, and so the Signalman points at the poster of Johnny Cash flipping the bird.

“Fine,” she says. “I just thought we were keeping our heads down.”

“I’ll see if I can’t smoke it inconspicuously,” he tells her, but doesn’t actually fish one of the cigarettes from the pack. “Anyway, so Ellison’s assignment in Babelsberg—in *Potsdam*—it was this soirée being thrown by a neo-Nazi outfit, a sorta latter-day offshoot of the Thule-Gesellschaft calling themselves the *Schwarze Sonne*. Crazy bunch of well-heeled fascist sonsabitches trying to open a doorway to Hyberborea and lead all the good Aryan boys and girls off to the promised land, etcetera and etcetera. Ellison was sent in undercover, as a heroin dealer from Tijuana, a Romanian expat named Elle Grau. So she shows up for this shindig, right, hosted at some billionaire’s mansion on the Griebnitzsee. And it’s a goddamn unholy bacchanalia of Rhineland mysticism and far right-wing politics, also known as pretty much what you’d expect. The cocaine and liquor flows like proverbial milk and honey. There’s whores of every conceivable flavor and a veritable battalion of Berliner skinheads working security and armed to the nines. Shit, there’s even—”

“Wait,” Mackenzie interrupts. “Nicodemo, isn’t she from somewhere in Ohio? Columbus or Cincinnati or someplace?”

“Yeah, she’s from Cleveland. So?”

“So, wouldn’t it have made more sense to establish her as an *American* expat?”

The Signalman looks up and glares at Mackenzie, then he looks down again and glares at the pack of Camels. The Doors song ends and Neil Young’s “Hey Hey, My My” immediately comes on to replace it.

“Well,” says the Signalman, “that would be a question for whoever was her handler at the time and also for whatever geek was

overseeing risk assessment. I assume Albany had their reasons, and you should follow my example. Maybe the *Schwarze Sonne* wasn't keen to deal with Americans or something. I don't know, because I wasn't there. It wasn't my call. And you're missing the point, besides. If you don't want to hear this, just tell me and I'll talk about something else." Then the tooth reminds him how many times he's put off having it pulled, and so he has another mouthful of J.T.S. Brown. He also takes out one of the cigarettes, but he doesn't light it. He feels a little better just having it parked there between his fingers.

"No," says Mackenzie Regan. "I'm sorry. Go on."

The Signalman swishes and swallows the bourbon. "Yeah, well, anyway," he says, "turns out half these Nazi bastards—and bitches—were werewolves and somehow we missed that, and here Ellison's walked into a pack of lycanthropes with no backup, no wire, not even a sidearm, just these two briefcases of uncut Mexican horse."

Mackenzie goes back to stirring her drink. "I sorta thought the whole point of Ellison Nicodemo is that she comes with the backup built in."

"Well, sure. But this thing in Babelsberg—and you'd know this if you'd actually bothered to read the file—it was an exfiltration op. We were trying to get someone out, okay? There was this teenage girl, kidnapped daughter of a Canadian diplomat, if I recall correctly, and that night she was scheduled to be sacrificed as a blood declaration of faith or some blah, blah, blah cultist shit, and Ellison was supposed to get in and get her out alive and in one piece. We'd worked a deal with Barbican Estate and once the girl and Ellison were clear, London was gonna level the place with an AIM-9 strike and write it off as a gas leak. Only a pair of Julia Set agents show up with their own agenda. They blow Ellison's cover, and everything goes sideways faster than you can say Jack Robinson. Total fucking bloodbath."

"She used Tindalos?" Mackenzie asks, and the Signalman shakes his head.

"Nope, not that night. But she still got that girl out of there," he answers. "So, kiddo, when I say Ellison Nicodemo was good, that right there's the sorta shit I'm talking about."

Mackenzie Regan takes a sip of her vodka and cranberry. Most of the ice has melted, and now it's more LA tap water than anything else. "Okay, so what do you think went wrong that night in Atlanta?"

"What I think is that's yet one more question that falls outside the purview of my authority," replies the Signalman, and so Mackenzie lets it drop.

"I met a werewolf once," she tells him, "up in Pennsylvania. She actually wasn't such a bad sort."

"Just shows to go you," he says. "Me, I'm gonna light up this damn coffin nail now, and management and the health codes of Los Angeles can go fuck themselves if they don't like it." And with that the Signalman retrieves his Zippo from a jacket pocket and flips back the silver cap. He lights the cigarette and blows smoke at the ceiling.

Mackenzie just shrugs and checks her wristwatch. "I still don't understand why we have to wait until tomorrow morning to pick her up," she says.

"'Theirs not to reason why,'" the Signalman tells her, and he winks. "'Theirs but to do and die.'" And then he reaches into his jacket again and takes out an envelope and lays it on the table next to the pack of Camels. The envelope's crumpled and bent from riding around in his pocket, and there's what looks to be a coffee stain on one corner. "This is strictly on the q.t., what I'm about to tell you," he says, then glances up at Mackenzie. "But I'm telling you because I sorta trust you, as much as I figure I can trust anyone these days. And, hey, you've been partnered up with me about two and a half months now."

"Okay, so what is it?" Mackenzie asks.

"My letter of resignation. When this is over and the dust has settled—assuming any of us lives that long—I'm putting in for retirement. I'm too old for this shit. I've been too old for this shit for some time now."

The Signalman watches Mackenzie's steel-blue eyes, and sure, there's surprise there, but not half as much as he'd expected there to be. He's all too aware of his reputation as one of the last of Albany's True Believers, a stone-cold MiB, the agency man through and through, balls to bones. The sort of man whose work is his life and

the sort of man who probably wouldn't last long without it. Definitely *not* the sort of man who voluntarily bows out of the game.

"You're serious?" she asks him and starts to reach for the envelope, then stops herself.

"Yes, I am," he replies. "I came real damn close back in 2015, after that goddamn mess by the Salton Sea. I *should'a* done it then, but . . ." He trails off and takes a drag on his cigarette.

"You *know* they're not going to be happy about this," Mackenzie says. "Do you really think they'll even accept it?"

The Signalman exhales a cloud of smoke, then picks the envelope back up off the table and returns it to his jacket. "No shit they won't be happy about it," he says. "But when they see I'm serious, and that I'm not gonna back down, I imagine they'll let me go. Anyway, what's one more Cold War dinosaur put out to pasture?"

Mackenzie sits up straight and crosses her arms. She looks past him towards the glowing red exit sign and the door leading back out onto Sunset Boulevard, into daylight and the shimmering, dusty wilds of La La Land. "I don't suppose why is really any of my business," she says.

"I'm wrung out, that's all. It ain't no more complicated than that. I've been at this business now for thirty-seven years, since way back before you—or Ellison—were even born. And I'm simply too tired to keep pace anymore. I'm not that damn Energizer bunny rabbit beating on its drum. Surely there's a limit to how many times a mortal man can fairly be expected to come face-to-face with cosmic annihilation, and this thing with Jehosheba Talog and all her little green fishmen, it's the last apocalypse I've got in me."

Neil Young gives way to Linda Ronstadt and "Blue Bayou," and neither Mackenzie nor the Signalman says anything else for two or three long minutes. He smokes his cigarette and she stares at the exit sign.

"Okay," she says finally. "Are you going to tell her?"

"You mean Ellison?"

"Yeah," says Mackenzie.

"You think there's some particular reason she needs to know?"

Mackenzie shrugs again and and rubs her temples. She's getting a headache. She hasn't had a good night's sleep since before the horror show in Gove City, and whenever she can't sleep she gets headaches. "Never mind," she says. "It's none of my business. But can I ask you a question?"

"You certainly can," he tells her, stubbing out his cigarette on the underside of the table and dropping the butt on the floor. "Shoot."

"Even if Nicodemo can still do what you want her to do, and even if she does it and everything goes off this time without a hitch, we're working on the assumption that killing the Talog woman will stop what she's started. We're *assuming* that the way it's going to work, yeah?"

"Yeah," the Signalman replies, "we are proceeding on that assumption, and no, there aren't any guarantees, just like usual."

"Is there at least a contingency plan?"

"Maybe. Possibly. We can always fucking hope. But nobody's told me, one way or the other. Still, since you asked, I'm sorta thinking Ellison *is* the contingency plan."

"Oh," says Mackenzie. She takes a bottle of store-brand aspirin from a pants pocket and stares at it.

"You getting another migraine?" the Signalman asks her. "Maybe it and my bum tooth could get together and compare notes." He lights another cigarette.

"Listen, I'll be back in a minute or two," she says, then slides out of the cherry-red Naugahyde booth.

"But you're okay? Besides the noggin, I mean?"

"Yeah," she says. "I'm fine. I just need to piss, that's all."

The Signalman nods, and she leaves him alone with his toothache and the defiant mighty middle finger of Johnny Cash, with his bourbon and dread and a nigh unto bottomless well of uncertainty about exactly what he's going to say to Ellison Nicodemo come Wednesday morning. Worse still, and worse by a long shot, about what he'll do if she puts up a fight.

13.: Bee of the Bird of the Moth

(Undated)

Sure, it all comes down to who you're gonna believe. But can't both things be true. This ain't no wave-particle duality sorta situation. Meaning no disrespect to X and butterflies and hurricanes, but this ain't no sun shining down at midnight so that walrus Buddha and carpenter Christ might go about their bloody business without the inconvenience of an electric torch. So either you take this literal or you don't and tell yourself it's all just some sort of crytographical malarkey, and sure, if that gets you through the night, if that gets you hard and wet, sweetheart, you go on ahead and be my guest. No skin off my dick.

But, really, it all comes down to who you're gonna believe.

Now, between you and me and the Staten Island Ferry, we're gonna cut the crap and talk about *Tindalos,* as I am given to understand the matter. Straight from the horse's mouth, as it were. The horse being this guy I knew who knew a guy who knew this hippie chick who knew this bull dyke physicist used to be in tight with a certain American nonprofit global policy think tank which shall here remain nameless. The way that particular horse laid it out, you gotta look at what showed up in the March 1929 issue of *Weird Tales* magazine as some kinda *temporally retroactive disinformation*. Yeah, I just made that up, that *phrase,* but it works about well as anything. The horse (and we'll call him Harry; Harry the Horse, just like in that Beatles song and *Guys and Dolls* and what the hell ever else), he *said* it was none other than the fabled Madam Immacolata what done the deed, planted the story under the name of this Frank Belknap Long fella, since she slips the surly bonds so well and all. But I don't know whether that's true or just more flaps and seals, given she ain't never exactly been a player for Albany. Given

her allegiances lie elsewhere. But who cares, right? Either way, all that fancy pulp window dressing doesn't show up until thirteen years *before* the Chicago Pile-1 goes critical and Enrico Fermi gets his wish and any number of those assembled to behold that blessed event are left with a nasty recurring *impression* that much, much more than the first self-sustaining, controlled nuclear chain reaction was achieved there beneath the bleachers of Stagg Field. Say *that* ten times fast, how about it. Well, anyway, there's Chianti from Dixie Cups all round and Arthur Compton phones up Jim Conant with the news how the Italian navigator has landed in the New World, and Conant, he wants to know how were the natives, and Dr. Compton replies very fucking friendly indeed. That's what you'll get in the history books. If you want to know about the poor unfortunate members of the CP-1 team who bore witness to what *crawled, slid,* or *wriggled* through the cracks that day, then we have to go off-off-off record. The Horse says folks saw a monster. Or monsters plural. He also says that, at the moment of criticality, they saw *a hole in time*. Who am I to argue, as Harry the Horse, he ain't yet ever steered me wrong.

I wish to strip from my eyes the veils of illusion that time has thrown over them, and see the beginning and the end.

Right.

There is an abyss of being which man has never fathomed.

Sure thing.

A hole in time, leading all the way back past Precambrian seas and good ol' Archean squiggly microbial what-have-yous, back *four billion plus years* and spare change to an aptly named Hadean hellscape, the brand-new molten moon filling up half the writhing charcoal sky. *That's* what they claimed they saw.

What's more, says the Horse, says he, during various debriefings over the next several months, agents of the National Defense Research Committee et al. were regaled with stories *of strange angles that have no counterpart on Earth* (quote/unquote) and formless grotesqueries that moved *slowly through angles. They have no bodies, and they move slowly through outrageous angles* (ibid., I think). When told to please be more precise, none of them does

much better. But someone used the word *hounds* and someone else spake the three-mystery syllables we keep coming back around to—*Tindalos*. A little of this bushwa even, allegedly, came from Fermi himself. Upshot being, maybe it wasn't just a bunch of stray neutrons got loose that Wednesday afternoon. As for the patriotic folks administering the Manhattan Project, they're just trying to stop Hitler and the Japs, and there's bombs to be built and dutifully dropped, and so no one strains themselves overly trying to make hide nor hair of the dubious ravings of a bunch of clearly excitable eggheads and their fellow travelers. Maybe it was something in the air. Who knows. An unforeseen psychoactive side effect of being so very proximal to all those graphite blocks and uranium pellets. Who cares, ducky. There were bigger fish to fry, fatter geese to cook, and so forth. Move along. Nothing to see here.

"The seeds of the deed move through angles in dim recesses of time. They are hungry and athirst!"

Oh, really? Hungry *and* athirst? I'm just saying, *I'd* have rolled *my* eyes. I mean, who *talks* like that? Anywho . . .

Where *was* I?

Where were *we?*

Rewind. Press play. Whatever. It all comes down to who you're gonna believe.

Harry the Horse, he likes to talk about dead people. It's a thing with him. As regards to the matter at hand, and I mean *Tindalos,* he has talked (in prudent, hushed tones, mind you) about the death of a doomed young man who worked for a certain DuPont chemical engineer, a chemical engineer who happened to be in attendance at Stagg Stadium on that celebrated, fateful December day in 1942. The victim was, allegedly, said chemist's secretary. Maybe also the object of numerous homosexual indiscretions. But who am I to judge? What you do in the privacy of your own Erlenmeyer flask and all that. So, six months after the experiment, the secretary goes and turns up dead, and I'm saying not just only *merely* dead, but, according to the ol' reliable Horse, really most *sincerely* dead. Dead *dammit.* Dead with Reddi-Wip and a maraschino cherry perched on top. And also, what is more, the scene of this gruesome discovery had been (aka

would *be*) described thirteen years *prior* in that aforementioned issue of *Weird Tales*. Wanna hide something right out in plain fucking sight? Just hide it *behind* you:

Chalmers lay stretched upon his back in the center of the room. He was starkly nude, and his chest and arms were covered with a peculiar bluish pus or ichor. His head lay grotesquely upon his chest. It had been completely severed from his body, and the features were twisted and torn and horribly mangled. Nowhere was there a trace of blood.

The Horse says he actually saw some corroborating crime scene photos what made the rounds a few years back, and maybe he did (but we're talking real deep web, darknet stuff here, so don't even bother googling this shit). He says over the years there have been a few dozen *identical* deaths, seemingly random. No discernable patterns or what have you. *Attacks,* he calls them. He's got unhealthy interests, does Harry. He'll talk your ear off about Elizabeth Short and Jack the Ripper and the Beast of Gévaudan, if you let him.

He's a sick twist, that one.

It was also him, by the by, what told me about the big black sphere Dreamland maybe had built special back about 2005, somewhere like Bolivia or Nevada or the goddamn Southern Mauristemo Islands, someplace *thin* like that. (But you know all about the *thin* places of the world, don't you? We've already had *that* conversation.) Supposedly, the whole *raison d'être* for this gadget—the sphere—was to create a sort of cubbyhole in spacetime so perfectly smooth on the inside that if you—well, not *you,* per se, but *someone*—were hiding *within it* you'd be safe as houses from these so-called *hounds of Tindalos*, these hungry and athirst creatures from another dimension that Fermi and his Project Y goons had inadvertently called up, these critters that *can only reach us through angles*. The inside of the sphere, we're talking hypersmooth, here. We're talking smoother than goose poop on a rotten banana peel, quantum stabilized atom mirrors of nanometric thickness cobbled together from an alchemical soup of lead molecules and silicon crystals and so on and such like. Real Marvin the Martian, Mr. Wizard territory, yeah? You better believe it.

So, I asked the Horse from whose mouth came all these sundry marvels, I asked him, “If these attacks are random, then what good’s a fallout shelter?” And he comes right back at me, whiz-bang, with the news that, somehow or another, those assholes have gone and weaponized *the hounds*. Sure, he was on beyond hazy on the details, though you can bet your sainted Aunt Beulah’s fat tukhus I did pry. All he would say was, “There’s some people, see, got a natural *affinity* (italics mine) for *Tindalos*. There’s some people born predisposed, kinda like a living, breathing, walking, talking, shitting dog whistle what only *these things* can hear.”

I *know,* right?

But dude, that’s what I’m *saying* here. That’s what I’m trying to *tell* you, okay? If there’s talent like *that* in the world, you can just forget goddamn sniper rifles and remote-triggered explosive devices, fucking MQ-9 Reaper drones and 007 umbrellas that inject deadly ricin micro-doses. You can forget Vladimir Putin and his fancy-ass radioactive fucking aerosolized polonium-210. Dude, you can forget *all* that shit. You can kiss it goodbye, because if my friend Harry the Horse knows of what he speaks, well, it’s a new damn ball of wax, ain’t it? It’s the dawn of a new day, and we stand at the threshold of a veritable *golden age* of executive action and extreme prejudice. *That’s* what I’m *saying,* dig?

If *the hounds* do their bidding? Shit.

What a fantastic death abyss, indeed.

But, like the fox said to the mama chicken, it all comes down, of course, to who you’re gonna believe.

Jesus, just lookit the time, will you . . .

14.: Strangers When We Meet (High & Dry)

(Atlanta, January 9, 2011)

And here is the long night before three Georgia cops find a dead shark hanging in an abandoned warehouse, and, just like almost every single time before, the Signalman and Ellison Nicodemo didn't actually plan on sex. But tomorrow Albany's trap at the High Museum of Art is scheduled to be sprung, and, as they say, tensions are high and any port in a storm and so on. After their flight touched down at Dobbins ARB, after the drive into the city from Marietta to the Kirkwood safehouse, there was a perfunctory, picked-over meal from some local burger joint called Zesto, grease and ketchup and French fries. When they'd eaten, she disappeared into the bathroom for fifteen minutes, while he finished off the bottle of J&B that he'd been nursing since they left New York that morning. And then, as if by some silent consent, they ended up together in the squeaky little bed, the Signalman clumsy and halting as always, a little too drunk to fuck, Ellison a breathless flurry of desperation and violent intensity. He tasted of Scotch and she tasted of fast-food onions and apprehension. When she tried to slip his left middle finger up her ass, the Signalman hesitated, and he'll have bruises to show for it in the morning. Ellison comes first, just like almost every single time before, and just like always she comes quiet as the tomb. No rowdy, boisterous orgasms for Ellison Nicodemo, Secret Weapon X in Dreamland's arsenal of super-classified toys and covert gadgetry, just gritted teeth and the sudden shudder of her narrow hips. Then, without a word, she climbs off him and goes to the bathroom to take a piss and a quick hot shower and to fix, leaving the Signalman alone to burp the worm for himself if he wants closure.

He doesn't bother. Instead, he gets up, pulls on his boxers and a mostly clean T-shirt, then cracks the seal on a fresh bottle of J&B. He

switches on the lamp beside the bed and reads a few pages from a week-old issue of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* waiting to see if she's coming back, not expecting that she will. She has her own room, after all.

But she does come back, and now, half an hour later, Ellison is sitting naked near the foot of the bed, her back pressed against the wall, legs crossed in a sloppy half-lotus position. Her hair is wet and slicked back from her face. She's smoking her Chesterfield and staring at the wide olive-green blackboard that takes up almost an entire side of the room. Some joker's scrawled MR. SPOCK SAYS RELAX in hot pink chalk. Despite her drooping eyelids, Ellison isn't quite nodding, isn't quite so fucked up that she's entirely beyond the capacity for casual conversation, so long as they stay in the shallow end of the pool. She points at the graffiti with her cigarette and asks, "Did this used to be a school or what?"

"Yeah," the Signalman replies, sipping his Scotch from a paper cup and watching her. "From 1922 until about ten years back, when it closed up and we bought the place. Remind me in the morning, and I'll show you where there's a map of the whole entire United States painted on the asphalt in the parking lot. Every state's done up in a different color."

"Okay, I'll remind you," she says, knowing full well that she won't.

"Anyway, I figure resource management will hang on to this dump a few more years, then it'll be sold off for condominiums or some shit. Urban pioneering. Gentrification." The way he says *gentrification,* it's the sort of tone someone else might reserve for a word like *leprosy*. He finishes his drink and pours another. "You doing okay over there, kiddo?"

In preference to a yea or nay, and only slurring slightly, Ellison asks him, "You really think she's gonna show tomorrow? You think she's really gonna fall for this?"

The Signalman shrugs and rubs his eyes. "The big brains behind the yellow door seem to think so. Me, I'm gonna stick to my usual wait-and-fucking-see approach. If she doesn't, we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. There are exigency protocols. If she does show, though, you're gonna be ready, right? You and Mr. White Fang?"

“I had a dream last night,” Ellison tells him, leaving the question unanswered.

“Oh yeah? Anything I should be worried about?”

“I had a dream about a flood,” she replies. “I had a dream about drowning. So, you tell me. Are you worried?”

The Signalman stops rubbing at his smarting eyes and wishes his Visine weren’t all the way across the room in his suitcase. He starts to ask Ellison if she’ll get it for him, then thinks better of it. He knows that look. Right now, she’s in the sweet spot and probably not up for the hike there and back again.

Ellison licks her dry lips and takes another pull on her cigarette.

“You dreamed you were drowning in a flood,” says the Signalman. “Not to sound dismissive, but, all things considered, that’s just about the least surprising thing I’ve heard all day.”

Ellison stops staring at the chalkboard and looks up at the ceiling.

“In my dream the water was the color of rust,” she says. “And I was running out of breath, trying to get back to the surface, only when I finally did, it was like hitting a pane of glass or plexi or something. You were on the other side, on your hands and knees, looking down at me. You had a claw hammer, and you kept hitting the surface of the water, but it wouldn’t break, no matter how hard you tried. The hammer just kept bouncing off. You looked afraid, and you were moving your lips, like you were trying to tell me something, but I couldn’t hear you. I just heard my heart, getting slower and slower.”

“Well, okay,” says the Signalman, “that’s pretty fucking god-awful,” and he lights a Camel and blows a couple of smoke rings at the cold Georgia night waiting on the other side of the tall, boarded-up windows. “Maybe we should talk about something else. What do you say?”

“Sure,” Ellison replies. “I was just thinking about it in the shower, that’s all. I was just thinking about the dream and wondering whether or not she’ll show.”

“Well, like I said, DIRD thinks so, and they’re more often right than not. We know how badly she wants the Syrian dingus. At this point, it’s pretty much Jehosheba’s holy goddamn grail, the one

missing piece in her grand eschatological jigsaw puzzle, and this is the first time it'll have seen the light of day since Albany got their mitts on that ugly hunk of rock back in the seventies. But hey, if she *doesn't* show, well, it won't be the first time I've been left holding my dick, now will it?" And he winks at her.

Ellison laughs. He hasn't heard her laugh in days, so at least there's that.

"But I think she'll be there," he says. "And we've got five crack sharpshooters are gonna be awfully disappointed if she isn't. I mean, if you need them."

"If I need them," Ellison nods.

"I'm just saying, they'll have your back, if it comes to that."

Ellison Nicodemo makes a gun with her thumb and index finger and mimes shooting at him. *Bang, bang, bang*. Then she stubs out the butt of her cigarette against the safehouse wall, leaving a jagged black smear across the off-white paint. "Was it also the wonks behind the yellow door who decided Jehosheba's actually inclined to worry about snipers and Mk 21 rifles?"

The Signalman frowns and sips his whiskey. "I ain't yet seen any evidence put forth to indicate the bitch is invulnerable to having her brains blown out by a .338 Norma Magnum cartridge, so how about let's not start in thinking that maybe she is. When all's said and done, Jehosheba's just another deluded patsy playing Stepin Fetchit for some prehistoric sonofabitch too lazy or conceited or—fortunately for us—hamstrung to do his own damn dirty work. But you get it in your head maybe she's *more* than that, well, you know better, Ellison. You know that's the worst and greatest power she's got."

"Then maybe you don't even need the hound this time," says Ellison, still staring glassy-eyed at the ceiling.

"Maybe not, but that's how Albany says this thing's gonna happen, so that's how its gonna happen. If it amounts to swatting a fly with a bulldozer, then so be it. Just so long as the fly gets swatted, no one's worrying about overkill."

Ellison sighs and licks her lips again. She's about to suggest that just possibly she and Jehosheba aren't so different, not in the final analysis, not when push comes to shove. Different masters, that's all.

Same sorry puppet show. But she doesn't, because what's the fucking point. She looks over at the Signalman and squints at the lamplight.

"And what if we *do* kill her," Ellison says, "but we're too late, or it just doesn't matter and killing her isn't enough to stop what she's set in motion? You think all the slide rules and pocket protectors have that covered, too?"

"I think you should try and get some sleep," he tells her. "However this plays out, tomorrow's gonna be a long day and I need you on the *qui vive*."

Ellison nods, and then she goes away to find her own bed. There are three other agents just down the hall, in case she gets lost. And the Signalman sits on the edge of the squeaky mattress in the old schoolroom that smells like sex and sweat, mold and chalk dust and stale tobacco smoke, and he thinks about monsters and wonders exactly when it got so easy for him to play roulette with other people's lives.

15.: Another Toe in the Ocean

(Providence, October 31, 2017)

Whatever Mackenzie Regan had expected of the Signalman, it wasn't the man she now found sitting in the diner booth across from her. Her father, a second-generation Minnesota horse farmer, would say this was a man who looked like he'd been rode hard and put up wet. Mackenzie, never given to Midwestern barnyard idioms, would simply say that he looks spent, in just about every way that a man entering late middle age can look spent, from the bruised insomniac's bags beneath his eyes to the beginnings of a proper drinker's nose. His black suit is wrinkled and dingy. There's dandruff on his shoulders and nicotine stains on his fingers and nails and teeth. His hair gives the impression that it hasn't so much gone grey as simply given up on the whole idea of color. He's a lot thinner than she expected.

Mackenzie was recruited just three years back, straight out of Quantico, and she's still (as her father would say) wet behind the ears, but the Signalman, he's a legend. And, she reminds herself, there are few things as sobering as meeting a legend who fails to measure up. Whatever she'd expected of the man who finally pushed the button at Deer Isle in 2012 and was boots on the ground at the Moonlight Ranch event, this wasn't it. Best not to count your chickens before they hatch, as her father would say.

"Hell of a blow last night," says the Signalman and dumps a stream of sugar into his coffee cup from the glass-and-stainless-steel dispenser. The cream he pours in afterwards swirls like a tiny white galaxy, a logarithmic clockwise spiral reminding her there's no such thing as mundane. "On the radio, I heard there were gusts to a hundred and thirty miles per hour up in New Hampshire. I heard there's more than sixty thousand people here in Rhode Island

without electricity this morning." He has a slight Southern drawl, Tennessee or Georgia or Alabama maybe. Someone once told her he was from Birmingham.

"Welcome to New England," she says and smiles and watches as the Signalman stirs his coffee. "Happy Halloween."

He smiles back, sort of, nods his head, and gazes past her at the morning traffic out on Westminster Street. "Kept me up most of the night," he says. "I've never cared for the wind, truth be told. I've never much cared for the sea, either. But it is a rare day when the world sits up, rolls over, and complies with our heart's desires. We go where we're told."

"Yes sir," she says.

"You had your breakfast yet?" he asks, and she tells him that no, she hasn't. "Well then, we'll eat in a bit," he says. "I just want to get a couple of the necessary unpleasantries out of the way first." And then he reaches into his jacket and takes out an old photograph, a glossy color 4×6 printed on Kodak paper. He slides it across the table to her. A waitress shows up and asks if Mackenzie wants coffee. She says she does, and the waitress goes away again.

"I know they've already sent some stuff over," says the Signalman, "but not this. This is the sort of thing I prefer not to trust to couriers."

"Yes sir," Mackenzie says again. "Of course," and she picks up the photograph. For whatever reason, she looks at the backside first. The paper has started to turn yellow around the edges and there's sloppy handwriting scrawled in blue ballpoint pen—*7/21/75 Marquardt fétiche, Perth*. Then she turns it over and looks at the front. She's already seen a lot of ugly in her three short, hard years with Albany, because ugly comes with the job, but none of it has prepared her for the thing in the photograph. She glances up at the Signalman, then back down at the picture. "I think I know what this is," she tells him.

The Signalman sips at his sweet, pale coffee, then stops watching the traffic and watches her, instead. "Yeah, I figured you might," he says. "You *were* the trigger for that surveillance team on the op down in Fall River last year, right?"

Mackenzie Regan licks her lips. Her mouth has gone dry.

“The Buffum Chace whatsit,” says the Signalman. “That mess with the cultists. You *were* on that team, correct?”

She sets the photo on the table, resisting the urge to hand it back to him or turn it face down so she won’t have to see the thing.

“This is supposed to be Mother Hydra, isn’t it?” she asks.

“That’s what they tell me,” he replies and runs the fingers of his right hand through his weary, colorless hair. The waitress brings Mackenzie’s coffee and asks if they’re ready to order. The Signalman tells her no—soon, but not yet. She doesn’t seem to notice the photograph lying on the table in front of Mackenzie. The waitress says she’ll check back in a bit, then leaves, and the Signalman returns to watching the traffic on Westminster.

“At the old house in Fall River,” says Mackenzie, “there was something painted on one of the walls. I think it was meant to be this. Didn’t really do it justice, though.”

“Hell of a thing, ain’t it? About yea big,” and he makes a fist to indicate the figure’s size. “Near as anyone can guess, it was made in Assyria during the late Bronze Age, carved from a hunk of iron sulfide that most likely formed in a deep-sea hydrothermal vent.”

Mackenzie ignores her coffee and picks up the photograph again. She knows better, but tells herself it’s only her imagination playing tricks that makes the paper feel oily and somehow unclean.

“You know anything about hydrothermal vents, Agent Regan?”

“Not really, no. I mean, nothing much beyond what you pick up from reading *National Geographic* and watching PBS.”

“So you might not know there are hydrothermal vents other places besides Earth. Europa, for instance. And Enceladus. That’s the planet Saturn’s sixth-largest moon.”

Before she thinks better of it, Mackenzie Regan tells the Signalman she knows what Enceladus is, that she had an astronomy course in college. He just nods and drinks his coffee and watches the cars on the other side of the plate-glass windows.

“All right then, Professor,” he says, “do you *also* know there are scientists who think Mars used to have hydrothermal vents, way back about three and a half billion years ago, when maybe there was a Martian ocean?”

“No,” she tells him. “I didn’t know that.”

“Well, turns out, there are. And here’s the kicker. If our planetologists and geochemists and whatnot are to be believed, the dingus in that picture was made from a piece of iron that formed in a hydrothermal vent on Mars and then, billions of years later, fell to Earth as a meteorite that landed somewhere in Mesopotamia. That’s in—”

“I know,” she says. “The people in Fall River, they wanted this.”

“Yeah, I just bet they did,” says the Signalman. “All sorts of bad folks have been after this piece of junk since some Frenchman went and dug it up at the ruins of Ugarit not long before the start of World War Two.”

“And this is what she’s after, the Welsh woman?” Mackenzie asks him. She hands the photograph back, and he takes it and returns it to his jacket pocket.

“Oh, no,” says the Signalman. “She already has it. She’s had it going on seven years. We as good as handed her the damn thing on a silver platter and said, ‘Here, crazy sea-witch lady who wants to wake up Great Cthulhu and flood the whole damn world, have your play-pretty. We heard the stars are right . . . again, so please, knock yourself out, with our compliments.’ That shitshow in Maine a while back, that was her. And either we got real damn lucky or it was just meant as some kinda dry run, a windup to the main attraction, the great egress, what have you. Either way, looks like she’s done licking whatever wounds we inflicted at Deer Isle.”

“Oh,” says Mackenzie. “I see.”

“Not yet you don’t,” says the Signalman, “but you will. And I want you to know, Agent Regan, I sincerely apologize about that ahead of time. If we’ve done our math right, crossed all our i’s and dotted all our t’s, this is going to be one of the bad ones, and I figure you’ll have plenty enough reasons to curse my name before it’s all over and done with.”

Mackenzie Regan looks down at the cup of coffee getting cold in front of her.

“Yes sir,” she says, though it isn’t what she wants to say at all.

“So, do you like blueberry pancakes, Agent Regan? A little bird told me this place makes damn fine blueberry pancakes, and I figure it would be some sort of sin to leave without finding out firsthand whether or not that is indeed the case.”

“Sure,” Mackenzie tells him. “I like blueberry pancakes.”

“Good to know,” he says, then turns around in the booth, looking for their waitress, waving to get her attention. But Mackenzie Regan doesn’t know what she’ll do when the food comes. The thought of eating is making her ill, and all she really wants is to go to the restroom and wash her hands, scrub away the layer of skin that came into contact with that awful photograph of that awful thing. But she won’t. Because someone in Albany gave this tired old man her name, and maybe he wasn’t exactly what she’d expected, and maybe the truth won’t match the hype, but *this* is what she’s been waiting for, the reason she turned down solid offers from the FBI and the NSA—a chance to get her hands dirty. A chance to fight the monsters.

16.: Point Nemo

(Ynys Llanddwyn and Elsewhere, January 18, 2018)

Only an instant ago, an instant or an hour and now it can hardly matter which, Ellison Nicodemo was on an airplane racing along high above the mesas and sagebrush, the lizards and mute Anasazi ruins of the Utah desert. She was coming down so very gently from the Signalman's clean and potent dope, reading something about a sperm whale in Pennsylvania, something absurd, something utterly idiotic. Something undoubtedly true. And then a single drop of water fell from nowhere at all—*splat*—onto the neatly paper-clipped stack of documents in her lap. She looked up, and everything that came *after* that happened so fast that it's at best a half-recollected blur of events as impossible as a sperm whale stranded on an interstate in the Appalachians, all of it as indifferent to reality as the gravity-defying antics of a Road Runner cartoon. Thirty-five thousand feet above Monument Valley, Albany's fancy jet airplane was filling up with seawater. It wasn't leaking in through the fuselage's thin aluminum skin, but seemed to be gushing from numerous invisible fountains suspended between the floor and the cabin ceiling. The water was freezing cold and filled with tiny darting fish. And there was a sound, too, an almost deafening roar rolling through the plane, like waves pounding boulders to sand. The Signalman was up and shouting something into a handheld MBITR radio, and Mackenzie Regan was still in her seat, staring wide-eyed at the water falling from nowhere, and she looked scared and confused and alone. In what seemed like only seconds, the water had already risen to a foot or two, sloshing and splashing about the narrow aisle. A shower of sparks rained down, bits of fire in the flood, as the electrical system began shorting out, and there was smoke and the air stank of ozone and burning plastic. Somewhere in the plane, an alarm was bleating

uselessly to itself and oxygen masks were dropping from their hidden compartments. Automatically, Ellison reached for her seatbelt, because is that what you *do,* isn't that exactly what the alarm is *telling* you do? She let go of the buckle and started to stand, instead, and the dossier slid from her lap, a careless scatter of pages cast upon the water, and she saw that now Mackenzie was watching her. It didn't take a telepath to read Mackenzie's thoughts; they were written plainly on her face and in her blue eyes.

This is your fault, junkie. Whatever this is, it's all your fault.

Still shouting into his radio, the Signalman turned and looked directly at Ellison. He made some sort of frantic motion with his left hand, but she had no idea what it was supposed to mean, what he was trying to tell her. And she saw, in that terrible moment, that he was as helpless as anyone who'd ever lived, just an old man who'd spent his life tilting at alien windmills, an old man shivering and soaked straight through to the skin, still clinging to the illusion there was anything left he could do to save this day or any other. She wanted to tell him that she was sorry, wanted to apologize for everything—for the drugs and how the operation in Atlanta had gone sideways and . . . all of it.

But then she wasn't on the plane anymore. For a while, she wasn't anywhere at all.

Then turn not pale, beloved snail, but come and join the dance.

Will you, won't you, will you, won't you . . .

Pulled free of the fast-foundering jet and the world and all its devices and tribulations, Ellison Nicodemo sinks like a stone through an absolute and utter darkness that she's only known once before, six and a half long years ago. A solid, smothering black that is neither cold nor warm, neither threatening nor indifferent. It wraps itself tightly around her, and ebony tendrils draw her down into its waiting gullet. No mere riptide or undertow, no sleeper wave or maelstrom has ever been even half so strong as this; she couldn't fight it if she wanted. And the darkness is filled with voices, a veritable clamor of voices tumbling one over the other, all straining to be heard. Some of them she recognizes, and some of them are memories, and some of them aren't much of anything but noise.

No, it isn't like that at all. You have to think of Tindalos as a metaphor, not an actuality. There is no literal hound. It's more like a thought experiment, or maybe nothing more than wishful thinking, that there could be a sort of close-range super-assassin so fucking good at what they do that all they need to get near their target is the meeting of two intersecting lines. Dude, fuck tradecraft, just hand them a congruent angle.

"Don't be afraid," says the siren, the woman named Jehosheba, and Ellison realizes that she *isn't* afraid, and she thinks how that fact alone ought to be sufficient to scare her half to death.

"That's not what I was saying," Ellison mumbles, half to herself.

"Well, all I know," says Black Jack Mortensen, "in my *day, we wouldn't have called shit like that the small stuff, fucking state-sponsored indoctrination, ramming all that faggot shit down our throats until we don't know up from down or even dick from a piece of pussy."*

"Well," says the Signalman, looking away from the diner window, "this isn't *your day, not anymore. And it ain't mine, either. For better or worse, we're just a couple of bad memories the world's busy trying to forget. So, do me a favor, okay, and let it go."*

"I'm *not* afraid," Ellison tells the siren, and she imagines a stream of bubbles escaping her open mouth and trailing back towards the airplane like a swarm of tiny jellyfish. She asks, "Are they going to die up there?"

"Not up there, no," the siren whispers. "After all, little killer, they're falling, too."

Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,
Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the deep
And full of voices, slowly rose and plunged
Roaring, and all the wave was in a flame . . .

"I'm drowning," Ellison says. "I'm drowning. That's what's happening, isn't it?"

"No, little killer," replies the siren, "you're not drowning. Not just yet."

At the bottom of the garden, we wore animal masks.

"There are still things I need you to see. Things I wouldn't show anyone else."

"Take us home," says the Chinese agent from X, the chaos theorist that Ellison's been sent all the way to Taiwan to kill. "Put us in darkness. Do not let us be hungry or alone." But the hound is very close now, and it's not as if Ellison really has any say in the matter. Que sera sera and all that happy horseshit.

"Why me?" she asks the siren, wondering if she's going to sink forever, down, down, down like Alice, all the way through the earth and out the other side.

"Because," says the siren, "if you look at it just the right way, we're almost the same sort of beast, you and I. We might as well be sisters. Here now, open your eyes."

Ellison Nicodemo had not even realized that they were closed.

It's night and she stands at the window of a small whitewashed stone cabin and looks out at the moonlight and the place where the wild Irish Sea meets a rocky beach. There's a smoky peat-turf fire burning in the hearth. And there are women, or things that used to be women, walking out of the sea. They wear tangled veils of kelp and periwinkles and the scaly flesh of fish. There's a naked girl child standing on the sand, waiting for them. The child lifts her arms in welcome.

"That's you, isn't it?" Ellison asks the siren, who's busy tending the smoky fire.

"It is," she answers. "It was. And my mother, too, and her mother before her."

"This is where it started, then?"

"No, little killer," says the siren, "this is only the house where I was born, and that is only the beach where I learned to swim. I don't know where it started. I doubt that I ever will. It doesn't matter."

One of the women from the sea lifts the child and holds her close and kisses her cheek and forehead.

"This isn't any different than the last time," Ellison says. "I'm still supposed to kill you. I still have to try."

“Why?” asks the siren, and she stops poking at the fire and comes to stand with Ellison at the window. Ellison had almost forgotten her face, her *human* face, and it isn’t unlovely, and it isn’t unkind. “Because a company man told you to? Because you believe that someone out there holds your leash? Weren’t you done with all that, houndwife, weren’t you finished doing their bidding? Weren’t you finally free?”

“Is that why you didn’t kill me?” Ellison Nicodemo asks the siren. “Is that why you sewed me up inside a rotting shark and left me scarred and half alive?”

“It was a gift,” the siren replies. “Not without a price, that’s true. But it was a gift, all the same.”

Low waves and foam race up the beach, shimmering in the pale moonlight, and break about the legs of the women who’ve walked out of the sea. The woman holding the child sets her back down on the sand.

“We can’t stay here much longer,” says the siren. “We shouldn’t be here at all.”

“How the fuck was it a gift?” Ellison asks her.

The siren quietly regards her for a moment or two and then replies, “How long had it been since anyone offered you a choice? What about your beloved Signalman? Did *he* ever give you a choice? No, little killer, he didn’t, because you were merely another asset to him, merely a pawn, another valuable commodity to be exploited until there was nothing valuable left.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Ellison says, but she knows that she’s lying to herself.

“Then how exactly was it? Tell me. I’m listening. Tell me of your loyalty to this man who made you his weapon. Tell me how you love him, even now.”

“I wasn’t ever in love with him,” she says, so there’s another lie.

“I suppose you’re not in love with the heroin, either?” the siren sighs. “I suppose next you’ll tell me that.”

On the beach, the child turns her head and looks towards the cabin, towards Ellison, and there’s a brilliant flash of white eyeshine, as if the moon is trapped somewhere inside the girl’s skull. The siren

pulls Ellison away from the window then, and once more she says how they've stayed too long, how they shouldn't have come here at all.

"It was foolish of me," she says, and the cabin melts away like sugar in hot coffee, and once again Ellison Nicodemo is plunging pell-mell through the lightless and unlightable void, washed in the tumult of voices and memory.

"Zealandia, most likely, from New Caledonia all the way south to the Campbell Plateau. Oh, I know the theosophists and Alhazredians have their hearts set on the South Pacific, but . . . anyway, you're missing the point here. There's just not enough water on the planet. Even if you melt every last bit of ice at the poles and all the glaciers, you're only looking at a sea-level rise of sixty-one meters, max, and sure, that's gonna ruin tourism in Florida and Hawaii, but it's a long, long way from Waterworld *or the goddamn Noachian Deluge. There's only about two billion metric tons of water to work with, see, and if you want to submerge the Himalayans, you'd need three times that amount. Do the math. If you really want to flood the globe, it's not just a matter of raising sea level, but of sinking all those inconvenient continents."*

"Are you going to kill me now?" Ellison asks the siren.

"If I'd only wanted to kill you, I'd have done it six years back, wouldn't I? If I'd only wanted you dead?"

"That's all fine and dandy, but the creationists are just gonna fire right back with a bunch of tired-ass pseudoscientific baloney about runaway subduction events and the extra water having come from 'the fountains of the deep' and 'the windows of heaven,' from huge freaking reservoirs buried in the outer mantle and from some sort of collapsing vapor canopies and—Jesus, why am I telling you *this? You've read more of that crap than I have. Anyway, I'd imagine if a Great Old One or two wants to play dunk tank with the whole wide world, the mere facts of the hydrosphere probably aren't gonna stand in the way."*

"I don't know," says Ellison, wondering if she's falling headfirst or feet first or neither. "I don't understand why you've done *anything* you've done." Not that it was ever her job, trying to understand. All

she had to do was be a good tin soldier and follow orders. Usually, all she had to do was show up and let the hound do the rest. Not always, but usually.

The Signalman sits in his office beneath the Erastus Corning Tower and reads aloud from the lab report on the sample of blue goop taken from initial tests with the Nicodemo kid. There's no one else in the room with him, but it's an old habit, reading lab reports out loud. It makes them slightly easier to decipher. "The substance," he reads, "bears numerous traits in common with the cytoplasm and nucleoplasm of living cells, especially those of fungi and animals. Like normal protoplasm, the sample behaves at times like a disordered colloidal solution and at other times like an integrated network, exhibiting distinct fluid and solid phases. But, as already noted on page two, the substance, while undoubtedly alive, completely lacks hydrolyzing enzymes, making it not only unique in known biology, but suggesting an extraterrestrial, and perhaps even extradimensional, origin. In the absence of enzymes . . ." He rubs his eyes and lights a cigarette.

"No, you don't know *yet,*" says the siren, "but you will, very soon. We've almost reached the bottom."

Ellison shivers, though she isn't cold, and she thinks, *So there is a bottom, after all,* and the siren replies, *Of course there is a bottom. You didn't think I'd let you fall forever, did you?*

"How would I know?" Ellison replies.

Meanwhile, the darkness around her seems to be growing thinner —not any less *dark,* but less palpable somehow. And the cascade of voices and remembrances is rapidly growing fainter, countless moments and thoughts and actions bleeding one into the other, smearing as she nears the end of her descent— *There is another shore, you know, upon the other side, where the good and the bad and the worst and the best have gone to their eternal rest, and I'd ask my friends to come and see an octopus's garden with me . . . But it isn't a hound. They aren't hounds at all. They aren't anything anyone will ever have a right name for, except that Oppenheimer, the old phony, went and called them Tindalos . . . Resignedly beneath the sky, the melancholy waters lie, and watching the*

furrow that widens behind you, long afloat on shipless oceans, tiefer, tiefer, Irgendwo in der tiefe Gibt es ein licht, and yes, there was one particular glance that made me afraid, the very deep did rot, instead of a cross, the Albatross, silver on the ocean stitching through the waves the edges of the sky.

And then only the sound of the wind.

"Open your eyes, little killer," says the siren, and Ellison Nicodemo does as she's been told (though, again, she hadn't been aware her eyes were closed). The darkness has released her into a strange coruscating daylight, by turns the green of an old Coke bottle and the pale translucent blue of fluorite crystals. Her pupils ache at even this weak, inconstant illumination, after so long a plummet through all that perfect dark, and she squints and her eyes tear and leak droplets of her own private ocean down her cheeks. Ellison sees that she's standing in a high place, on a skyscraper's concrete balcony, gazing out across a flooded city, out across a flooded world. Only the spires of the tallest towers haven't yet been swallowed by the rising sea, and then she realizes that this was once Manhattan, because she spots the silver needle of the Chrysler Building not too far off. She looks down to find that a greasy mist lays heavily across the water, parting here and there to allow her the briefest glimpses of a savage menagerie of marine saurians and enormous fishes, archaic yoke-toothed whales and tentacled, boneless things resurrected from the vanished depths of vanished geologic aeons. In the sky above her, unspeakable creatures screech and wheel on leathery wings the color of an oil slick.

. . . there you could look at a thing, monstrous and free . . .

"'Let the fool gape and shudder,'" says the siren. "'*We* know, and can look on it without a wink.'"

Ellison winces at a searing jolt of cold from her left hand and looks down to see that it's clenched into a fist. When she folds her fingers open, she finds a carved lump of greenish stone cradled in her palm. *Like was sewn up inside my hands the day in the warehouse,* she thinks. Only *this* stone, it isn't some castaway ten-for-a-dollar effigy of Dagon, it's the very same idol that Jehosheba was willing to risk everything to have, the face of Mother Hydra, the Madonna of

Maelstroms, Daughter of the Abyss. Ellison shudders and lets the thing roll out of her hand and tumble over the edge of the balcony and down to the water hundreds of feet below.

"So it's too late," she says, wiping at her wet cheeks, feeling angry for the first time since the siren took her from the airplane. "You kept me away so long that it's too late now, and everything we were trying to stop, it's already happened and I've failed."

Behind her, there's a grinding noise, like two icebergs scraping one against the other, like the shredding of the steel hulls girding unsinkable White Star liners. Ellison turns to find the siren waiting there behind her in the gloom of a gutted, burned-out apartment. Her eyes flash copper and crimson.

"Well," she says, "it's not as if you lot were taking very good care of the place yourselves." She smiles, revealing row upon row of recurved, serrate teeth. "And there were *others* who held dominion here, before mankind was even a glimmer in the eye of the cosmos, before time was even time. And it's really *their* world, you know. It was really never anything else."

"Then why am I still alive?"

"You'll see," the siren replies. "Very soon now, you'll see." And now the woman steps nearer and extends a hand, running her fingertips lightly along the left side of Ellison's cheek and down her throat, along the ugly scars there. "My poor, sad beast," she says. "I wish *that* had not been necessary. I would take it back, if I could."

The siren steps to one side, and Ellison sees that there's something sprawled on the floor, another revelation half visible in the coruscating murk. She needs a moment to recognize that what she's seeing is the hound—*her* hound—what's left of it, mangled and twisted and bleeding out its sticky blue ichor, that indestructible, undying creature laid low, every bit as dead and broken as broken, dead, and drowned New York City. Ellison starts to ask the siren how, but stops herself. What would ever be the point of knowing?

"Another gift," says the siren, this demon that once was only a woman named Jehosheba, that once was a child waiting for her mother on a lonely Welsh seashore, her humanity stolen even before birth by scheming, nameless beings playing a game of chess with the

world. “You’re free of it. You’re free of it forever. Now, they are waiting for us on the shingle. Will you come and join the dance?”

Without another word, Ellison Nicodemo reaches into her jacket and draws from its holster the Glock 9mm she was given by supply sergeant back at Los Angeles Air Force Base. This close, she doesn’t have to aim. She simply squeezes the trigger and the gun shouts thunder. There isn’t even time for the siren to look surprised before her skull comes apart in a red-black spray of bone and blood and brain. Jehosheba Talog drops like a stone. On the floor beside the dead hound, her stubborn body shudders, and Ellison fires the gun a second time and a third, putting two more rounds in the chest of the priestess of Mother Hydra and Father Kraken, the woman who was raised to end the world.

“I can do my *own* killing,” Ellison says to the corpse. “I always could.”

Will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, will you join the dance?
I know the day I die . . .

And then from everywhere comes the hateful, cheated bellow of a titan, a god that is no god shaken awake from its ancient, imprisoned slumber, thinking how its time has at last come round again—only to be told to go right back to sleep, do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars, better fucking luck next time. It bellows, and the walls and floor and ceiling shake. The concrete balcony begins to crumble beneath Ellison’s feet and she thinks maybe a sound like that, it could almost split the moon in two. Such a sound, it might even snuff out stars. And then the world unravels around her once again, melting away, evaporating same as the whitewashed stone cabin at Ynys Llanddwyn melted away. Only this time, the darkness isn’t waiting there to claim her. This time, she doesn’t fall. Instead, she finds herself in bright daylight, kneeling on dry, rust-colored sand and rock with the Glock still in her hand, as a bitter January wind howls across John Ford’s valley and the predatory shadows of unmarked black helicopters race across the landscape towards her. Ellison gets to her feet and waits for them, and she tries not to think how maybe that had been just a little bit too easy and how maybe

Jehosheba had known it was coming all along. Buying time, that's the new V-Day. . . .

17.: The Small Print

(East of Birmingham, Alabama, February 19, 2018)

It's a bright, chilly Monday morning, almost a month to the day since Utah, and Ellison Nicodemo stands near the top of a low hill on the edge of a weary little town, almost within easy sight of the interstate. She's surrounded by grey granite headstones that seem to stand silent guard against the tawdry, metastasized sprawl of Walmart and fast-food restaurants and strip-mall parking lots bordering the cemetery. The sky overhead is a wide carnivorous blue, not even the hint of a cloud to relieve the monotony. *It's the sort of sky that can blind you,* she thinks, *if you stare at it too long*. Dressed in her sharp black suit and shiny black shoes and black sunglasses, a matching black knapsack on her shoulder and the bolo tie the Signalman gave her cinched about her collar, Ellison imagines she looks like someone who belongs here among these graves and beneath a merciless sky like that. A crow, a raven, a dapper vulture dutifully come to ferry a soul down to Hell.

Unfortunately, she isn't alone. No way they would have let her come by herself, and so there's her handler waiting in a black Ford sedan outside the Cedar Grove First Baptist Church and there's also Agent Jack Dunaway standing at her side, a thin, officious prick of a man whom the Signalman had loathed. For the past four weeks, Ellison has seen far too much of Jack Dunaway, as she's been shuffled to and fro between Groom Lake and Albany and the bunker at the Dugway Proving Ground. He's watched on while she's endured a barrage of debriefings and interrogations and so many medical, metaphysical, and psychological tests that Ellison finally lost count and lost track and decided it would continue for whatever remained of her life. But then, two days ago, Dunaway called her into a conference room and told her she'd be permitted to attend the

Signalman's funeral. Until that moment, she hadn't even been sure that he was dead, though any other outcome had seemed unlikely. The Beechcraft King Air B200 had disintegrated in midair, and the wreckage was found scattered over more than a mile of desert. Only Mackenzie Regan survived. Her parachute had deployed, and the Signalman's hadn't, but survival had come at the cost of an eye, her left leg below the knee, and a couple of fingers. So, the Signalman was dead, along with the pilot and copilot, both found with their lungs filled with seawater. Yet here was Ellison Nicodemo, who'd walked away without so much as a scratch or a bruise or a broken fingernail. The retrieval team had picked her up on Navajo land, not far from the Arizona border, just shy of forty-eight hours after she'd disappeared from the plane.

Lucky girl.

Ellison glances up, and there's a jet tracing a white contrail streak across that too-blue Alabama sky.

"You have any idea how much it would have pissed him off, you being here today?" she asks Jack Dunaway, and he shrugs the shrug of the truly indifferent and checks the Timex on his wrist.

"If you want to say your goodbyes," he tells her, "you should do it now. We have to be back at Sumpter Smith by noon, and it's already a quarter past ten."

"Yeah, sure," she says. "Don't piss yourself. I won't be long," and then she leaves Mr. Jack Dunaway and goes halfway down the hill to the place where, if the company's to be believed, the Signalman's body has been laid to rest. There's no marker yet and no flowers, either. There was a minister here a little while ago, and he read a dutiful, perfunctory service over the mound of soil and red clay only mostly hidden beneath a dingy blanket of synthetic turf. Ellison had thought it best to hang back until he was done. Whatever was being read from the minister's book, it probably wasn't anything she wanted to hear.

You know what I hate worse than cemeteries? the Signalman asked her, years and years ago. *Nothing, that's what. Absolutely nothing at all.*

For a minute or two, Ellison just stands and stares at her feet and at the abominable fake grass. Then she takes the silver pocket watch from her blazer, the Signalman's silver pocket watch, made in 1888 by the Elgin Watch Company of Elgin, Illinois, and she opens it and checks the time. The watch is just about the only other thing that survived the crash more or less intact, and Albany, in a show of generosity almost as inexplicable as letting her attend the funeral, decided she could have it. Dunaway had even given it to her himself.

Someone said you'd want this. It's yours if you do.

It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me, he said, Quentin, I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire . . .

Ellison unshoulders the black knapsack and unzips it. She takes out a pint bottle of J&B Scotch, cracks the seal, unscrews the cap, and has a long swallow before emptying the rest of the whisky on the grave. Then she reaches into the knapsack again, and this time she takes out a pack of unfiltered Camel cigarettes and a red, white, and blue "I Like Ike" campaign button; she sets them both on the ground beside the grave. She zips the knapsack closed and returns it to her shoulder.

"I just wanted to say that I don't blame you," she says, speaking just above a whisper. "Not for any of it. I figure, what you did, it was what you had to do, and mostly I think you did right by me, or as right as you were able, as right as they'd ever allow." She pauses and checks the pocket watch again. It's ten thirteen. "I don't know what I'm going to do now," she says, closing the watch and glancing towards the black Ford in the church parking lot, thinking about Albany and Nevada and her filthy, stinking apartment in LA, about the dope and Jehosheba Talog. "She's dead," Ellison tells the grave. "I killed her. She killed the hound, and I killed her. And there haven't been any more whales turn up in Pennsylvania, so maybe it's over."

Let's not get ahead of ourselves, kiddo. Best we not go making any promises until we know how it all shakes out a little farther down the road.

"Just get some sleep, old man," says Ellison Nicodemo, talking to a ghost if there's any ghost listening, and then she turns and walks away, winding between the rows of headstones and footstones,

careful not to step on any of the graves. When she was a girl, someone once told her that was the worst sort of bad luck.

18.: Exit Music for the Anthropocene

(April 2151, Isle of Brooklyn Proper)

A light wind is blowing from the northeast, and the morning smells like oil. The sky is filled with hungry, noisy gulls.

From her perch on the roof, Inamorata is using Old Duarte's spyglass, trying to spot the slick she's been told rose up in the night, a great black bubble freed by a breach in one of the ancient concrete storage tanks. It only takes her a moment to pin it down, a muddy, iridescent smudge marring the blue-green shimmer of Queens Bar, less than half a mile out from Prospect Beach. A slick that long, that wide, it could easily yield fifteen, maybe twenty thousand gallons. She's seen bigger, but not for several years now, and not since the Hud extended its reach to the barrier islands. It's surprising there's not already a company team on the scene, siphoning it off. There will be soon enough, surely by noon, noon at the latest. One of the big sweeper skiffs docked at Carnegie Island and a host of support vessels will slip smooth and silent through the heat haze, set up shop, and get to it. And any jackals caught trying to nip a tub or three will be sunk on sight, with the governor's blessing. But for now, the slick is a pristine blemish on the sea. In this light and at this hour, it's almost beautiful, the way that so many poisonous things are beautiful.

Inamorata puts down the spyglass just as Geli comes up from below. She's a sanderling girl, is Geli Núñez, stalking the drift lines for whatever refuse the tides fetch up. She's nineteen, and most of her life she spent on the Row, with the other beachcombers and the crabbers and the bums. Before she met Inamorata, before they became lovers and Geli came to live with her in Old Duarte's house on Cemetery Hill, she worked for one of the black-market agents. Now, Inamorata has her registered with a legal pickers syndicate,

and Geli gets top dollar and doesn't have to worry quite so much about the law.

"You seen it, then?" she asks Inamorata.

"I've seen it," Inamorata replies.

"It's a gulper," says Geli, and she sits down near Inamorata's perch and begins emptying her morning's haul of plastic out onto the roof to dry and be sorted. In the sunlight, Geli's auburn hair shines like a new copper pot.

"It's big," Inamorata tells her, "but it's not as big as all that."

Geli shrugs and pulls a fat wad of green nylon fishing line from her gunnysack, all tangled with wire weed and kelp. "Well, Joe Sugar, he says it's a gulper."

"Joe Sugar lets on, and you know he hasn't seen it for himself. Good take?"

"Oh, just you see this," Geli grins, and she looks up, squinting at the bright morning sky, cloudless and a shade of blue so pale it might as well be alabaster. "Down at the pilings, right in close to Fincher's docks, there was a stranding. All of it starfish and urchins, hundreds upon hundreds of them—thousands even, maybe. Starfish and urchins big about as my hand. I think they might'a washed upcurrent from Park Sloop or the Slaughter."

Inamorata looks back to sea again, staring out across the water towards the oil. "Could have been poisoned by the slick," she says, half to herself.

"Maybe. There was some sheen on the sand, so might have been the slick got them. But, anyway, that ain't the point of it," and then Geli reaches deep into her sack and pulls something out from the very bottom. "This," she says and holds it up for Inamorata to see. "Found it at the stranding, mixed in with the dead stuff. It's jade, I think. Real jade, not poly or resin. Gasper already offered me an even twenty for it, before I could get back here, which means it's worth eighty, easy and sure."

Inamorata is island born and island raised, not so much more than a sanderling herself, and in her twenty-seven years she's seen her share of ugliness and misbegotten dragged in by the tides. There's a whole drowned world out there, always puking up its

secrets and mistakes, the shameful ghosts of a wasted, shining petrol city that went under before her grandmother's mother was born. But this, this is something rare indeed, the milky green lump in Geli's hand, and it catches her off guard.

"Looks Japanese," says Geli. "Doesn't it look Japanese? I think maybe it's an oni. An oni or a dragon."

To Inamorata, it doesn't look much like either. Geli holds it out to her, and Inamorata leans forward and takes the thing from her hand. It's about as big around as her balled-up fist and heavy—definitely stone—though she's hardly qualified to say whether the thing is actually jade or not. She holds it up to the sun, and finds that it's translucent. Whoever carved it, whenever and whyever it was carved, however many decades or centuries ago, they'd clearly meant to convey something terrible, and Inamorata would have to admit that they succeeded in spades. The word that comes first to her mind is *troll,* because when she was little her mother told her a fairy story about three nanny goats trying to cross the ruins of the Williamsburg Bridge. But there was an enormous sea troll nesting below the span, a monstrous, malformed creature of slime and muck and rusted steel, and whenever the goats tried to cross, the troll would rise up and threaten to eat them. This thing that Geli's found on the beach, it could be the graven likeness of her mother's bridge troll, a refugee from Inamorata's childhood nightmares. Except, she always imagined the troll to be male, though she can't recall whether her mother ever explicitly stated that it was. The maybe-jade thing, it's unmistakably female, an obscene caricature of the feminine form, from the exaggerated fullness of its breasts, hips, and buttocks to the gape of its vulva. But its bulging eyes, those make her think of the fishmongers' stalls down on the Row, and the mass of finger-like tendrils sprouting from its belly remind her of a sea anemone.

"It's not the bridge troll," Geli says, and Inamorata frowns and looks at her, then looks back at the ugly lump of green stone she's holding. Emil Duarte, who's seventy-three and went to school in some faraway dry place, has referred to Geli as an "innate twelfth-hierarchy intuitive," and he has explained to Inamorata how people like Geli are used by the military and the multicorps. Down on the

Row, there were folks who called her a witch, who thought she was possessed by demons, because of the way she often knows things that she shouldn't know, that she has no way of knowing, and that she can never explain how she knows. Inamorata hasn't ever told Geli Núñez about her mother's bridge troll story.

"And Gasper offered you twenty?" she asks, passing the thing back to Geli. The stone feels slippery, oily, and when she looks at her fingers and palms, they glisten like she's been handling slugs. She wipes her hands on her skirt.

"I can do better," Geli replies.

"Probably," Inamorata agrees. "Have Sully post it for you, full span. I'll cover the tab. You want more than twenty, then the buyer's gonna have to come from somewhere besides the island."

"Will do," says Geli, turning the thing over and over, examining the object from every angle.

Admiring it, Inamorata thinks, and the thought gives her an unpleasant little shiver. *To her, it isn't horrible at all.*

"I wish you could have seen all those starfish and urchins," Geli says, and she returns the green thing to her gunny. "Heaps of them, thousands and thousands, like maybe the sea's gotten bored with starfish and urchins and sent them all packing."

And just then, far out across the water, a siren starts to wail; a few seconds later, another pipes up, and shortly after that, a third joins the chorus, the shrill cry of the Hudson Authority's hurricane warning towers. Inamorata picks up the spyglass again and scans the low waves, but there's still no sign of a company crew, only a few ragged fishing boats, bobbing and rolling and going about their day-to-day business. The waves, the boats, and the slick. Nothing she can see to warrant an alarm.

"What's happening?" asks Geli, sounding more curious than concerned. "Why would they wind up the screamers on a day like today? There's not a cloud in the sky."

"I don't know," Inamorata tells her, and then she focuses on the slick, which seems bigger than it did only five or ten minutes before. An enormous flock of gulls has gathered above it, and she watches as the birds dive, one by one, from the sky and plummet headfirst into

the oil. There's no splash when they hit. Not even a sludgy ripple. They're just gone. But odder still, the slick seems to be drifting nearer Prospect Beach, moving south and east, even though the current from the sound should be pushing it west, off towards Liberty Bay.

"You go find Emil," she says, and the way she says it, Geli doesn't hesitate, and she doesn't ask why. She just gets up and heads quickly back downstairs, shouting for the old man. Inamorata doesn't take her eye from the spyglass, not looking away from the falling birds or the shimmering oily patch, hardly half a mile from shore now and creeping slowly closer. But she's thinking of that ugly chunk of stone from Geli's sack, and she's thinking of dead starfish and sea urchins, and she's remembering the way her mother did the voice of the bridge troll.

And the sirens scream.

Author's Note

Black Helicopters, the first chapter of The Tinfoil Dossier, was written—almost effortlessly, it seemed at the time—over the course of only twelve days in December of 2012. The second chapter, *Agents of Dreamland,* was written—somewhat less effortlessly—over the course of about six weeks in the summer of 2015. By comparison, *The Tindalos Asset* was begun in June 2017 and finally "finished" in May 2019. But that's not entirely the whole story, because several sections that would be included in the novella had already been written in December 2015, as "Excerpts from *An Eschatology Quadrille,*" for Ellen Datlow's *Children of Lovecraft* anthology. Moreover, I came back to the manuscript again at the end of January 2020 and did a bit of rewriting. So, revise that original estimate and say that the writing of *The Tindalos Asset* spanned something more like *four* years—plus a couple of months. No, I can't entirely explain why this one took so much time. It just fucking did.

Regardless, my thanks to my editor, Jonathan Strahan, and to Tordotcom Publishing for showing such great patience with me as I blew deadline after deadline. My thanks also to my partner, Kathryn Pollnac, the original Agent Sixty-Six, for every *other* sort of patience and for being my constant sounding board and first reader. Thanks to Sonya Taaffe and Vic Ruiz, each of whom I also owe various sorts of debts on this novella. As I noted six and a half years ago in the acknowledgements for *Black Helicopters,* I do not write in a vacuum, and *The Tindalos Asset* bears the scars of its many various influences. First and foremost and most obviously, Frank Belknap Long's 1929 short story, "The Hounds of Tindalos," along with various works by H. P. Lovecraft, especially *The Shadow Over Innsmouth,* "Dagon," and "The Call of Cthulhu." Other influences are less obvious, and far too many to list in full. But I should note that the post-deluge geography and place names of "Exit Music for the Anthropocene" were borrowed from the speculative cartography of Jeffrey Linn, imagining a one-hundred foot sea-level rise and the

emergence of the “Sea of New York,” following the melting of roughly (only) half the world’s ice caps. Also, Coil’s *Backwards,* They Might Be Giants’ *The Else* and *The Spine, Wake* by Dead Can Dance, David Bowie’s *Outside,* “Casey’s Last Ride” by Kris Kristofferson, Peter Gabriel’s *Scratch My Back,* Arcade Fire’s *Neon Bible* and *Everything Now,* Muse’s *Black Holes and Revelations* and *Absolution,* the songs of Kitty Wells and Connie Francis, Tonio K’s *Romeo Unchained,* and *Take Fountain* by The Wedding Present—in all this music is the *soul* of the book. Also and finally, my description of Mother Hydra (here and elsewhere) undoubtedly owes something to the artwork of Dave Carson and Randy Broecker.

About the Author

PHOTOGRAPH BY KYLE CASSIDY

CAITLÍN R. KIERNAN was born near Dublin, Ireland, in 1964, was raised in Alabama and Florida, and before turning to fiction writing in 1992 they'd already worked as a vertebrate paleontologist, a museum exhibit technician, a biology instructor, a reproductive rights activist, and a drag queen. Their novels include *Silk, Threshold, Low Red Moon, Murder of Angels, Daughter of Hounds, The Red Tree,* and *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir*. They are a prolific short-fiction author, and, to date, have published more than 270 short stories, collected in *Tales of Pain and Wonder, Wrong Thing, From Weird and Distinct Shores, Alabaster, A is for Alien, The Ammonite Violin & Others, Confessions of a Five-Chambered Heart, The Ape's Wife and Other Stories, Dear Sweet Filthy World, Houses Under the Sea,* and *The Dinosaur Tourist*. Subterranean Press has published a two-volume "best of" retrospective of their short fiction, *Two Worlds and In Between* and *Beneath an Oil-Dark Sea,* and, more recently, Tachyon Publications released *The Very Best of Caitlín R. Kiernan*. In the 1990s, they scripted *The Dreaming* for DC Comics/Vertigo, and they returned to comics in 2011 with *Alabaster: Wolves, Alabaster: Grimmer Tales,* and *Alabaster: The Good, the Bad, and the Bird,* for Dark Horse Comics. They are a two-time recipient of both the World Fantasy and the Bram Stoker Awards, a four-time recipient of the World Horror Guild Award, and have also received the James Tiptree Jr. and Locus Awards, along with nominations for the Nebula Award, Mythopoeic Award, British Fantasy Award, and Shirley Jackson Award. They studied paleontology, geology, and comparative zoology at both the University of Alabama in Birmingham and the University of Colorado. In 1988, they codescribed a new genus and species of mosasaur, *Selmasaurus russelli,* from Alabama, and ten years later discovered the first evidence of velociraptorine theropod dinosaurs ("raptors") from the southeastern United States. In 2017, Brown University's John Hay Library established the Caitlín R. Kiernan Papers, archiving juvenilia, manuscripts, artwork, and other material related to their writing. In 2019, they returned to paleontology and are now a research associate and vertebrate fossil preparator at the

McWane Science Center in Birmingham, Alabama. Recently, they coauthored "*Asmodochelys parhami,* a new fossil marine turtle from the Campanian Demopolis Chalk and the stratigraphic congruence of competing marine turtle phylogenies," based in part on a specimen they discovered in 2001. Kiernan currently lives in Birmingham with their partner, Kathryn A. Pollnac, and two cats, Selwyn and Lydia.

Also by Caitlín R. Kiernan

Black Helicopters
Agents of Dreamland
Cherry Bomb (as Kathleen Tierney)
Red Delicious (as Kathleen Tierney)
Blood Oranges (as Kathleen Tierney)
The Drowning Girl: A Memoir
The Red Tree
Beowulf (novelization)
Daughter of Hounds
Murder of Angels
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